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303rd Bombardment Group



rian D O'Neill

The son of a US Air Force pilot, BRIAN D O'NEILL has had a strong interest in military aviation, and Eighth Air Force history, since childhood. His best-selling account of the 303rd Bomb Group during the 'crisis period' of the daylight bombing campaign, *Half A Wing, Three Engines and A Prayer - B-17s Over Germany*, has been continuously in print since 1989, and is now in its second edition. The book's publication resulted in him being made an Honorary Member of the 303rd Bombardment Group (H) Association in 2000. A lawyer with over 25 years experience, O'Neill recently left Curtiss-Wright Corporation, where he was General Counsel, to open his own law office and to pursue his writing avocation. He lives and works in Lyndhurst, New Jersey, where he practices corporate, commercial and immigration law, and continues to write on aviation related topics. This is his first book for Osprey.

Dorset-based artist MARK STYLING has illustrated a number of books in both the Aircraft of the Aces and Combat Aircraft series, and this is his first in the Aviation Elite Units series. A master of computer-generated Mac art, he has produced some of the finest B-17 Flying Fortress profiles ever seen in the four volumes devoted to the Boeing bomber in the companion Combat Aircraft series.

303rd Bombardment Group

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Brian D O'Neill

Series editor Tony Holmes

Front cover

'Nice going, Cal!' That was what lead bombardier, Capt Jack Fawcett, thought as he stared disbelievingly at the Fw 190's 'dark grey mass' passing just underneath *THE 8 BALL Mk II*. 'Cal' was Lt Col William Calhoun, lead pilot and CO of the 359th Bomb Squadron (BS) of the 303rd 'Hell's Angels' Bomb Group (BG). Calhoun reported, 'The fighters were desperate today. A group of 30 Fw 190s came at us head-on and I had to lift a wing once to keep one from hitting us.'

It was 11 January 1944, just inside the Dutch coast. The 'Hell's Angels', under Brig Gen Robert Travis who was sitting next to Calhoun in the cockpit, were leading the entire Eighth Air Force on the first 'deep penetration' bombing mission against German industrial targets since the second Schweinfurt raid on 14 October 1943. Travis subsequently stated, 'The fighters started coming in at us in bunches. Our first attack was four Fw 190s, next 30 '190s, next 12, and they just kept coming. They attacked straight through the formation from all angles without even rolling over.'

Heavy cloud build-up was to have fatal consequences for the mission. It caused Eighth Air Force headquarters to issue a recall order to all units. Most of the 2nd and 3rd Bomb Divisions, and the bulk of the fighter escort, did return. In a still controversial decision, Travis elected to lead the 1st Bomb Division to its targets because 'I heard no recall'. As lead group, the 303rd faced the brunt of the Luftwaffe attacks, losing 11 of 40 B-17s. However, Fawcett laid a perfect pattern of bombs on the target at Oschersleben.

The other aircraft depicted in this specially commissioned artwork by Mark Postlethwaite is early H2X radar-equipped B-17F 42-3491 from the 812th BS/482nd PFF BG, which was eventually lost over Berlin on 6 March 1944. The Fw 190 passing between the two bombers is painted in period markings of *Jagdgeschwader 1* which, according to combat reports, fought a series of running battles with the 303rd BG during the course of the 11 January 1944 mission (Cover artwork by Mark Postlethwaite)

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EDITORS NOTE

To make this best-selling series as authoritative as possible, the Editor would be interested in hearing from any individual who may have relevant photographs, documentation or first-hand experiences relating to the world's elite pilots, and their aircraft, of the various theatres of war. Any material used will be credited to its original source. Please e-mail Tony Holmes
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INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Displaying an *esprit-de-corps* fully consistent with its wartime status as an elite B-17 group of the US Army Air Force's Eighth Air Force, the veterans of the 303rd 'Hell's Angels' Bombardment Group (H) Association (303rd BGA) have amassed a vast amount of literature documenting the group's activities in World War 2. No single individual has, in my opinion, done more to 'pull everything together' than Harry D Gobrecht, 303rd BGA historian. His seminal 900-page history, *Might in Flight - Daily Diary of the Eighth Air Force's 'Hell's Angels'*, surely sets an unequalled standard for comprehensiveness.

Harry's assistance has been so great that he should be considered a co-author of this Aviation Elite Units volume, although I retain sole responsibility for any errors. Much here is the result of his research, and he has carefully reviewed the manuscript for accuracy. Harry and his wife, Barbara, graciously made their home available to me to review the vast 303rd BG Association photo archives. A majority of the photographs come from it, ensuring that the colour profile section contains almost all new B-17s.

Gary Moncur, webmaster of the 303rd BG Association's Internet site (www.303rdbga.com) and principal force behind its CD-ROM, has been equally generous in sharing the journal of his father, Vern Moncur, and in countless other ways. Special thanks are due to Lorraine Shelhamer, widow of David Shelhamer, for making David's diary available. She spared no effort to find his colour photographs of *VICIOUS VIRGIN* and *Spirit of Wanette* and of YB-40 *Tampa Tornado* in 303rd livery. Heartfelt thanks also go to Francis Hinds and Mel Schulstad of the original air echelon, to Quentin Hargrove and Peter Zimba of the ground echelon, to Bill Bergeron, Darrell Gust, Henry Eich and Walt Mayer for their personal accounts and to Robert Hand for permission to quote from his late-war memoir, *Last Raid*. Everyone else helping me on this 'group effort' has my very sincere thanks.

With the wealth of information available, selecting material has been a great challenge. I have chosen to highlight the 303rd's history during the 'pioneer' period, and the usually overlooked contributions of the ground echelon. Chapters one to four cover group formation to the end of the pioneer period in May 1943. Chapter five is a pictorial essay dedicated to the ground echelon. Chapter six assesses 303rd performance during the 'crisis period' in daylight bombing from June 1943 to December 1943. Chapter seven covers the group's finest moments, over Oschersleben on 11 January 1944, its participation in the *Big Week* battles of February 1944 and the first major Eighth Air Force mission to Berlin on 6 March 1944. Finally, chapter eight covers the period of mass-bombing and ultimate victory.

Brian D O'Neill
January 2003

FORMATION AND TRAINING

The attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 found the United States woefully unprepared, not only to meet the surprise Japanese assault but also to wage any kind of mass, mechanised war against the Axis Powers.

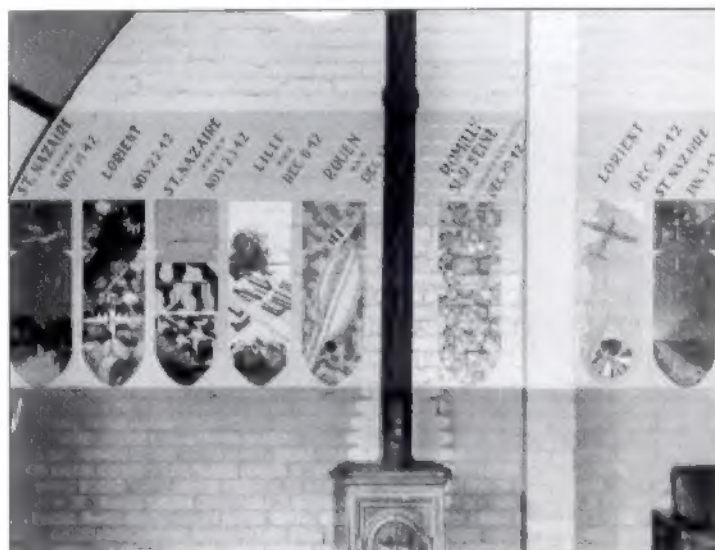
The lack of readiness was nowhere better shown than in the well-known incident of 12 B-17Cs – six each from the 38th and 88th Reconnaissance Squadrons – flying into Hickam Field from California, en route to augment American forces in the Philippines. They met the Japanese north of Oahu at around 0800 hrs, with aircraft stripped of armour to allow extra fuel and with machine guns packed in Cosmoline and stored in bomb-bays. They lost the Japanese in the clouds and proceeded to Oahu. Nine B-17s landed at Hickam and two at nearby Haleiwa in the teeth of the Japanese attack. The twelfth, with two engines gone, landed on a golf course. At the day's end the Fortress units were fortunate to have sustained only three casualties – one dead and two wounded. One B-17 was destroyed and two badly damaged.

The ground echelon of the 38th RS was also on its way to the Philippines, having departed San Francisco by ship on 6 December 1941. In the chaos that followed the attack, the ship returned and on the 9th the ground echelon was temporarily assigned to Bakersfield, California. It would get into the war eventually, but not in the Pacific. Instead, these experienced mechanics and support personnel would join one of the most famous B-17 units in the European theatre of operations – the 303rd Bombardment Group (H).

The US Army Air Force (USAAF) was pitifully ill-equipped to fight Japan, much less Germany when that nation declared war on 11 December 1941. When the Japanese struck, the USAAF had an inventory of about 3000 aircraft, of which 1157 were actually fit for combat and only 159 of these were four-engined bombers. Despite aggressive plans to expand USAAF personnel, the number of combat-ready men was equally small.

Following weeks of initial war planning, the Eighth Air Force was officially 'activated' – assigned personnel and equipment – on 28 December at Savannah, Georgia. The same day, the 303rd Bombardment Group (BG) was officially 'constituted' – created on paper with a numerical designation ready for activation – as an Eighth Air Force unit. Initial plans had the Eighth supporting an invasion of north-west Africa. When they were abandoned, Gen 'Hap' Arnold, USAAF Chief of Staff, accepted a suggestion that the Eighth form the nucleus of US air power in Britain. In February 1942 Gen Ira Eaker flew to England with a small staff, some of whom had only recently been civilians, to begin the process of getting the Eighth off the ground.

A scenery backdrop from *Twelve O'Clock High*? This evocative mural's carefully painted picture-story of each mission could easily be mistaken for a backdrop from *Twelve O'Clock High*, the classic 1950 film about combat leadership during the Eighth Air Force's difficult early days in England. However, it was photographed in a now forgotten common area of Station 107, Molesworth, home of the 303rd 'Hell's Angels' Bombardment Group (H). Personnel from the 'pioneer' 303rd were at Molesworth between 12 September 1942 and 1 July 1945



The Eighth's story is one of citizen-soldiers joining a small cadre of military professionals. Their first task was to master the rudiments of bombardment aviation. Their next was to learn the rough art of war against seasoned, determined enemies as the Eighth's leaders advanced an agenda of 'daylight precision bombing' against strategic targets in Europe. Having mastered the art of strategic bombing, it was then their duty to 'press on regardless' until ultimate victory was achieved.

The process was far from smooth. There were delays and disappointments because some career officers were not up to the task in the abrupt transition from peace to war. It took time and many lives for the true combat leaders to emerge and create the tactics and doctrines necessary to assure success in the daylight bombing campaign. Winning the air war also took unparalleled numbers of aircraft, an immense infrastructure of ground personnel and support facilities and highly experienced aircrew fighting in the most lethal combat environment faced by any Americans in World War 2.

In Eighth Air Force history four B-17 groups – the 91st, 303rd, 305th and 306th – are known as the 'pioneers' because, while other units flew missions earlier, these were the first whose assignment to the Eighth was permanent. They were the ones who faced the enormous job of translating pre-war strategic bombing theory into war-winning reality. As one of the pioneer groups, the 303rd was part of the effort from the daylight campaign's very beginnings to its very end. The 'Hell's Angels' accomplishments throughout easily make it one of the elite formations in one of the most respected military organisations in history.

The 303rd was activated on 3 February 1942 at Pendleton Field, Oregon, with a small nucleus of personnel under the command of Lt Col Ford Lauer. On the 13th the group was transferred to Gowen Field near Boise, Idaho, where it began to receive men and equipment from other units to make up its first three bombardment squadrons, the 358th, 359th and 360th BSs. Three days later the group was assigned its first four B-17Es, together with three Douglas C-39s (essentially a DC-3 with the narrow fuselage and smaller outer wings of a DC-2) which were temporarily

assigned to it. Multi-engine familiarisation in C-39 and B-17 transition flights began next day for the group's 'green' pilots, many of whom had only just received their wings following single-engine training. Parallel training was also performed for the ground echelon.

The plan was for the 303rd to acquire increasing numbers of aircraft and men as it completed ten weeks of initial training at Gowen Field by mid-April 1942. The emphasis was on development of individual aircrew skills, especially for B-17 first pilots. Preliminary aircrew and groundcrew team training would then take place. The group was to



complete simulated combat training elsewhere, and be fully combat-ready when it deployed to England in June 1942 as the Eighth's first heavy bomber group.

The timetable was in trouble from the start. Bad weather played a part – heavy snow during the third week of February resulted in flight cancellations, and only two first pilots were qualified by the 22nd. Inclement weather continued to hamper operations in the following weeks.

Other problems, though, were attributable to human error and leadership lapses. A collision on the ramp put two Fortresses out of commission on the 23rd, and although the group had eight B-17Es assigned to it in early March, seven were unserviceable for mechanical reasons on the 5th. Only 30 officers out of 170 assigned and 45 attached had qualified as B-17 first pilots. To make matters worse, the three C-39s were transferred out on 10 March.

Maintenance help arrived on the 13th when the ground echelon of the 38th RS became part of the 303rd. The 38th would receive additional personnel from other disbanded reconnaissance units and form the nucleus of the group's fourth bombardment squadron, the 427th, on 22 April. The group remained seriously behind schedule when two A-20Cs were assigned to it on 22 March as gunnery training target-tugs. Far too many officers had still to qualify as first pilots, yet, inexplicably, the group CO declared 29 March a unit holiday and no training flights took place. A peacetime atmosphere still pervaded group operations.

April 1942 was certainly the nadir of the group's pre-combat training days. The number of B-17Es had been increased to 12 when the month began, but the 303rd suffered its first training fatalities – three flying officers and five enlisted aircrew – when a Fortress crashed on the 3rd. Three days later 18 B-17Es arrived, but there was a significant organisational setback the next day. New regulations required all flying officers to have 100 hours of B-17E co-pilot time before they could be checked out as first pilots. This caused a dramatic reduction in the number of qualified first-pilots. One young officer who clearly did qualify was 1Lt Lewis E Lyle, who would duly become a key figure in the group.

Snowed-in – the 303rd first assembled as a complete military unit at Gowen Field, near Boise, Idaho, in mid-February 1942 to familiarise its fledgling pilots with the B-17 and teach crews to fly it. This 1942 winter scene of two 303rd B-17Es at Gowen shows why it was difficult to get in as much flight time as the group needed. Heavy snows played havoc with the flying schedule for much of February and March

A light moment at Gowen Field, this scene capturing a social event during early group training. The officer pointing at the 'chow hound' is Capt Edgar Snyder Jr of the 427th BS. A pre-war officer, Snyder gave outstanding service to the group throughout the war. He became 427th CO and later Deputy Group CO in England. An accomplished mission leader, he led the 303rd on the second Schweinfurt raid, on 14 October 1943, in *Mr Five by Five*. Today, Gowen Field is a USAF Reserve base



Worse was to come on 10 April when Second Air Force representatives conducted a surprise operational readiness inspection (ORI) six days ahead of schedule. The group failed, and now the pressure was on to pass the final ORI on the 22nd, and unfortunate shortcuts were taken. Each B-17 and crew was to be inspected on the ground prior to group take-off for a simulated bombing and gunnery mission. Incredibly, the lead crew selected by the group CO had not been trained to operate the B-17's Norden bomb-sight. They planned to hit the target by using predetermined visual checkpoints on the pre-established bombing run. This scheme came to naught when the inspectors changed the route and target. The lead crew had no idea what to do and the target was missed by thousands of feet. The rest of the group also performed poorly. The group therefore failed its second ORI, and plans to deploy it to England in June 1942 were put on indefinite hold.

This had a definite effect on group leadership, and training flights increased dramatically. By early May air training was taking place seven-days-a-week, and by the first week of the month the air echelon was beginning to muster full formations of 24 aircraft. Two weeks into May, bombing, formation, instrument and gunnery flights were being performed with excellent results. The 303rd was beginning to shape up so it could ship out. The CO even received a promotion to full colonel on 18 May.

But any hopes that improved performance would make up for the failed ORIs were dashed on 22 April when four of the best 303rd crews were transferred to the 97th BG to assist that group in its deployment to England. On 20 May four more crews were transferred, and on the 27th a significant contingent of personnel and aircraft – 17 B-17Es, two recently-acquired B-18s (an obsolescent bomber version of the C-47) and a C-39 – were sent on temporary special assignment to Muroc, California. Augmented by additional group flying officers on 1 June, their mission was to fly anti-submarine patrols and guard the West Coast against

Gowen Field on 10 April 1942. This photograph of 303rd B-17Es and flying personnel was taken during the group's first operational readiness inspection (ORI), which was conducted by the Second Air Force, and came as a rude surprise as the inspectors arrived six days ahead of schedule. The aircraft in the centre is B-17E 41-2553, assigned to the 359th BS on 6 April 1942. It remained in 303rd service until it moved to Alamogordo, New Mexico, and remained in the USA as a trainer until July 1943. It was scrapped at Albuquerque, New Mexico, on 28 June 1945





Alamogordo – this comic photo of the Headquarters Squadron Photographic Section offices at Alamogordo illustrates just how primitive base facilities were. It is easy to imagine how difficult and unpleasant it was trying to develop aerial photographs in a tent 'darkroom' in the blazing hot New Mexico summer sun

Japanese sea borne attack. This was just before the Battle of Midway on 3-6 June 1942, and the nation's leaders were taking no chances. The Japanese actually invaded American soil at Kiska and Attu Islands in the Aleutians as part of their ill-fated Midway operation.

The final blow to hopes of early deployment to England came on 29 May. Col Lauer was relieved of command and eight crews were permanently transferred to the 306th BG to assist that unit in its deployment to the UK. The 303rd faced an uncertain future as May turned into June.

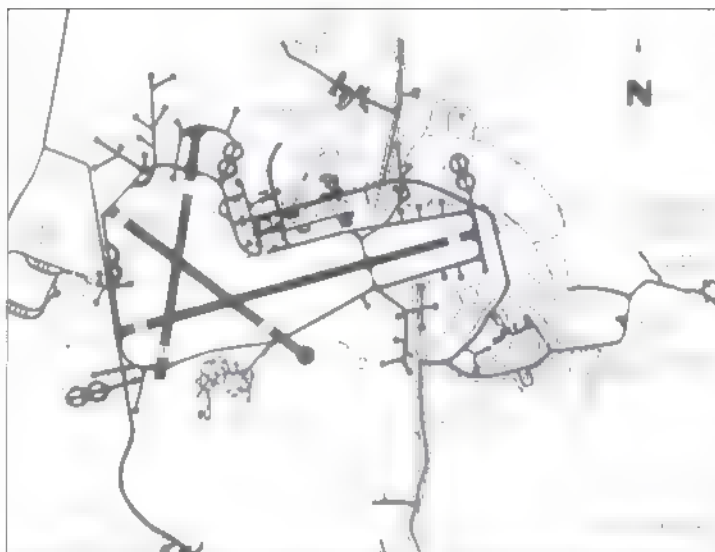
With no aircraft to service at Gowen, the ground echelon's activities

in early June consisted of calisthenics, athletics, drill and the like. Training films were shown, including the memorable one on sexual hygiene immortalised in Sgt George Baker's comic strip *The Sad Sack* (see www.sadsack.net). By the 6th, however, the group had a new interim CO, plus orders to begin preparations for a change of station. By mid-June both the air and grounds echelons were separately en route to a primitive training field at Alamogordo, New Mexico. Here, the group fell into a routine of blazing hot days that were hell on the ground echelon but whose clear skies allowed for much flying. New flying personnel arrived in July and on the 13th a permanent CO, Col James Wallace, took command.

Abruptly, during the first week of August the group received orders to move to Biggs Field, a new USAAF base at El Paso, Texas. The ground echelon was still setting up there when the aircrews, with just nine B-17Es, one B-18, and one A-20C, flew their first 18 training flights on the 8th. By the 12th it was becoming clear that the group's stay at Biggs would be short because it was placed top of the priority list for overseas deployment. As the air echelon performed simulated combat missions, the groundcrews began packing again. The effort was redoubled on the 17th when the order came to leave Biggs Field by noon on the 24th. Flying came to a virtual standstill, but not before the group had suffered its second fatal accident on the 23rd when a B-17E flying in extremely severe weather near Las Cruces, New Mexico, came apart in mid-air. Of the nine men aboard only two, in the radio-room, survived. One of them was 2Lt Quentin Hargrove, engineering officer of the 427th BS. He reported:

'We were given instructions to go on oxygen, which meant we were ascending to a higher altitude in an effort to get above some bad weather in the area. I was reaching inside the bomb-bay to plug in my oxygen mask when the fuselage broke in half where I was kneeling. I heard an enormous crushing noise, much like someone stepping on an egg crate, and I knew the plane was disintegrating.

'An immediate rush of cold air told me I was in the outside air, and luckily I was wearing a back pack-type parachute and reached for the rip



Station 107, Molesworth. This wartime map provides a good overview of the 303rd's 1942-45 home. It shows the 427th BS housed in the centre section of the field, with the 358th BS occupying 'Site 2' and the 359th and 360th sites 6 and 8 respectively. Molesworth remains operational today as the home of the US military's Joint Analysis Center

Quonset hut luxury – an interior view of the 359th BS enlisted quarters at Site 6. Of interest is the bare concrete floor and simple coal stove with coal storage bin in the centre. Each Quonset hut had two stoves, one at each end of the building. Coal supplies for the stoves were not plentiful, and foraging expeditions were frequent. The RAF-style, three-piece 'biscuit' mattresses allowed the cold to seep through the cracks (Mei Schulstad)

aeroplane came apart. He obviously opened his parachute very late as he was injured from hitting the ground very hard. Before we could make a temporary shelter out of my parachute to protect us from the rain, a near-by rancher picked us up and took us to a clinic in Las Cruces, where we were temporarily patched up until an ambulance from El Paso arrived.

'In my opinion the aeroplane crash was due to the hazards of severe bad-weather flying, in which pilots can become disoriented and the aeroplane will go into violent maneuvers.'

Both survivors eventually rejoined the group. Lt Hargrove served in the 303rd throughout the war, one of many in the ground echelon to do so.

At 0300 hrs the next morning, group personnel were woken to begin the trip overseas. The ground echelon, under the command of Maj Charles Marion, travelled by train to Fort Dix, New Jersey, and to New York City, where they boarded the liner *Queen Mary*. She sailed on 5 September and docked at Greenock, Scotland, on the 11th. After an overnight train trip the ground echelon reached their destination, Station



107, Molesworth, 70 miles north of London. Settling in and getting the base ready for the air echelon's arrival was now their top priority.

The air echelon left their B-17Es at Biggs and proceeded by train to Kellogg Field, Battle Creek, Michigan. Between 11 September and 2 October they took delivery of 35 new B-17Fs, 33 built by Boeing and two by Douglas. Each crew was given the opportunity to name the aircraft it would fly to England. Most B-17s had names painted in simple script or block letters, with some receiving names and more elaborate decoration later. At least one – 41-24620 *snap! crackle! pop!* – had elaborate nose art painted at Kellogg Field. Its pilot, 1Lt Jacob Fredericks, had been an employee of the Kellogg company, which asked staff artist Clinton H Dole to decorate the aircraft with a motif based on the three elves trademark of Kellogg's Rice Krispies cereal.

The crews developed a strong attachment to these B-17s. Unlike the experience of the individual replacement crews who came later, and whose aircraft were sent to replacement pools immediately upon landing in the UK, these were the bombers the 303rd would fly into combat. Very few were destined to survive (see Appendix 1).

The B-17s left Kellogg Field between 3 and 13 October 1942 for Molesworth, via Dow Field, in Maine, Gander Field, in Newfoundland and Prestwick, in Scotland. Morale at Molesworth soared when the group's first aircraft arrived on 21 October. The last flew in on the 27th, and although events would show that the group was still far from combat-ready, the 303rd looked forward to its first mission as part of the Eighth's 1st Bombardment Wing.



The crew of B-17F 41-24539 VK-K *Jersey Bounce* of the 358th BS pose for a group photo. All 303rd aircraft were photographed with members of their original crews upon their arrival at Prestwick, Scotland, during the group's deployment to the UK. This picture of 1Lt Robert Nolan's crew was taken on 13 October 1942. Nolan completed his 25-mission tour as a captain on 11 June 1943. *Jersey Bounce*, named after a popular 1941 swing number, was one of the lucky few original group B-17Fs to survive the war.



B-17F 41-24620 PU-P *snap! crackle! pop!* of the 360th BS, with 1Lt Jacob Fredericks' crew, was photographed on 14 October 1942. The name and nose art refer to the long-time trademark of Kellogg's Rice Krispies cereal. Known crewmembers are, back row, left to right, 1Lt Fredericks (pilot), 2Lt Arthur Way (co-pilot), 2Lt Otis Hoyt (navigator) and 2Lt Milton Fonorow (bombardier). S/Sgt Howard Henry Nardine is in the front row, second from right. Note the 360th BS patch on Way's A-2 jacket. This aircraft was lost on 3 January 1943 while being flown by another crew.

THE EARLY MISSIONS

It would be three weeks before the 303rd was slated for its first combat mission. The time was taken up by practice flights and mock briefings, as well as interminable lectures on subjects directly relevant to the air echelon's coming trial by fire – the Luftwaffe, aircraft recognition, becoming prisoners of war, escape, security, intelligence, radio code practice, weather and first aid. Last, but not least, there was a two-hour film, *Next of Kin*, whose subject was no morale booster for the crews.

In fact, morale throughout the Eighth Air Force at this time was not good, but not because of casualties which are inevitable in war. The Eighth's mission itself – to win the war by conducting daylight precision bombing of strategic targets in Europe – was under siege. Senior American officers like Gen Eaker, who now headed VIII Bomber Command, and his immediate superior, Gen Carl 'Tooney' Spaatz, certainly saw strategic bombing as the key to victory because of the doctrine that 'the bomber will always get through'. But vital support for the concept was lacking at the highest political levels. Churchill was inclined to back *his* general, Air Marshal Sir Arthur Harris, commander in chief of RAF Bomber Command, in the latter's request for US four-engined bombers merely to supplement the RAF's area night-bombing campaign. President Roosevelt was willing to be convinced that this was the preferred course of action.

It would be months before an impassioned presentation by Eaker for 'around-the-clock' bombing, delivered at the Casablanca Conference in January 1943, would secure the necessary political commitment to the daylight strategic bombing campaign.

There was certainly nothing in the Eighth's track record to inspire over-confidence in November 1942. Its first heavy bomber mission, flown by the 97th BG to Rouen, France, on 17 August 1942, had resulted in little damage. The same was true of the other early missions flown by the 92nd, 301st and 306th BGs, the B-17 units preceding the 303rd to England. Additional raids flown by the 93rd and 44th BGs, the first two B-24 units in England, merely underlined the difficulties the Eighth would face operating two heavy bomber types with dissimilar handling characteristics. Indeed, the Eighth failed to utilise the B-24 effectively in the daylight campaign throughout 1942 and 1943. Until sufficient numbers could operate separately as their own bombardment division in 1944, B-24s were employed mainly in unsuccessful diversions which did not draw Luftwaffe attention away from the larger, slower B-17 formations.

Compounding this problem was the fact that basic bombing procedures and doctrines had not been worked out. Aircraft still bombed individually, with each bombardier sighting on the target. Optimal bombing formations had yet to be established. Finally, many gunners had not mastered the rudiments of flexible aerial gunnery, where the object is to hit one moving target from another unfixed firing platform on a moving aircraft. The problem was especially acute with hand-aimed guns like those in the B-17F's nose, cheeks, radio-room, waist and tail, which did not have the benefit of the top and ball turrets' lead-computing gun sights.

There were other significant obstacles. Early fighter opposition was much fiercer than expected, restricting the bombers to shallow penetration missions against targets in France, Belgium and Holland that were within the limited range of escorting RAF Spitfires. The effectiveness of German flak forced the bomber formations to fly at altitudes in excess of 20,000 ft on most missions to minimise casualties. The weather also proved to be a great Axis ally. Ten-tenths cloud frequently covered targets, making daylight precision bombing impossible.

Considering that a number of early units, the 97th and 301st BGs among them, were transferred to the Twelfth Air Force in November 1942 to support Operation *Torch*, the Allied invasion of North Africa, it is not surprising that the Eighth was effectively 'starting over' when the 303rd and 305th BGs arrived in England in late 1942. On the eve of the 303rd's first mission, 16 November 1942, the Eighth had just the four 'pioneer' B-17 groups (the 92nd BG had been given the mission of training replacement crews) and two B-24 groups, the 44th and 93rd, to continue the bombing offensive. These were the only heavy bomber groups the Eighth would have for the next six months when new units, and significant numbers of replacement crews, began to join the daylight campaign in May 1943.

In late 1942 the U-boat threat, together with inter-service politics, dictated that the Eighth's strategic efforts be directed against the massive submarine pens the Germans had built in many French ports along the Bay of Biscay. Those in cities like St Nazaire, Brest and Lorient had roofs of steel-reinforced concrete literally dozens of feet thick. And the Germans were constantly working to reinforce these structures with innovations like cement 'bomb-catching grids' to minimise the blast effect from armour-piercing bombs.

One consequence of this, not fully realised at the time, was that the bomb loads carried by the B-17s – ten 500-lb General Purpose (GP) or High Explosive (HE) or two 2000-lb HE bombs – were insufficient to cause any real damage to these structures. It was only after D-Day that the RAF succeeded in seriously damaging U-boat pens using 12,000-lb and 22,000-lb *Tallboy* and *Grand Slam* bombs developed by Barnes Wallace, the inventor of the bombs used to breach the Ruhr dams on 16/17 May 1943. The best that could be hoped for with the Eighth's weapons was damage to subsidiary facilities serving the pens. Yet even here the Germans were taking no chances, as the Luftwaffe had greatly reinforced flak defences surrounding the ports. Even before the 303rd flew its first mission, St Nazaire had earned the nickname 'flak city' among bomber crews.

High excitement prevailed on the morning of 17 November 1942 when Col Wallace announced at briefing that the 303rd, along with four other groups, would be attacking St Nazaire. After 288 days of training, virtually everyone at Molesworth was ready to do his part. To use a catchphrase popular at the time, 'this was it!' It was a dramatic moment when Wallace announced the crews and aircraft that would be flying. He described the primary target in St Nazaire, the secondary target, a U-boat pen near Lorient, and mentioned Brest as the target of last resort. Maj Marion, who had risen to become deputy group CO, was leading the mission. He would be co-pilot to Lewis Lyle, now a captain, in 41-24559 *OOULD SOLJER*. Twenty-one crews and aircraft were to take part.



B-17F 41-24559 PU-C 00OLD SOLJER was the flagship of the 360th BS. As such, it had the distinction of leading the 303rd on its first mission, against the U-boat pens at St Nazaire, on 17 November 1942. Capt Lewis Lyle flew the aircraft, with Maj Charles K Marion as mission leader. Lyle can be seen in this photograph standing in the back row, third from left. Note the nickname *Edna* on the cowl of the No 3 engine, and the jury-rigged 0.50-cal nose gun installed in the right 0.30-cal machine gun socket

Wallace then turned the briefing over to a junior officer, who discussed flak defences in and around the target city. At this point bombardiers, navigators, radiomen and gunners broke off for their own briefings. The group's aircraft took off between 0923 and 0935 hrs, but aborts soon reduced the ranks to just 16 Fortresses. These proceeded to St Nazaire, encountering light flak en route. The sense of anticlimax and frustration can be imagined when the 303rd finally reached the target area, only to find it obscured by cloud. There was no alternative but to take the bombs back to base.

Wallace would lead the next mission himself the following day, and this time the group would bomb St Nazaire. But post-mission reactions were not what might have been expected. Orders had been received for the group to bomb La Pallice, home of further U-boat pens, but due to a mix-up new orders changing the target were not delivered to the right people until after the aircrew briefing. Wing headquarters was contacted and the 303rd received permission to attack La Pallice. The group dispatched 21 aircraft, the first taking off at 1025 hrs, and there were only two aborts. Faulty navigation, however, caused the group to veer over 100 miles off course. The 303rd followed another group to what was thought to be the target area and dropped its bombs from 19,400 ft in the face of 'intense heavy' but inaccurate flak. Many hits in the dock area were observed in exchange for light damage to several group aircraft and three slightly wounded men.

More intense enemy opposition was encountered on the return journey, when enemy fighters were met and the formation was attacked for about 20 minutes by 18 to 20 Fw 190s. Sgt Kenneth 'Joe' Kurtenbach, tail gunner of the 360th BS's 41-24602 *Yardbird*, claimed the group's first victory when he saw a fighter turn on its side with smoke coming from its engine. He fired several bursts into the aircraft's belly, watched flames coming from the fuselage and then observed it go 'out of control' into the clouds. Four other fighters were claimed as probables and three as damaged.

When the group returned to Molesworth an incredulous Wallace was told that the wrong city had been bombed, and it reportedly took 'a considerable amount of time' for him to accept the mistake. Clearly, the group had improvements to make in pre-mission procedures and aerial navigation if future raids were to go according to plan. 'Our officers didn't have much experience reading the old RAF maps we were given', according to Louis M 'Mel' Schulstad, who was first pilot of the 360th BS's 41-24567 *Beats Me*.

The next mission, against the U-boat pens at Lorient on 22 November 1942, went somewhat better. The 303rd was the only group of five to find and bomb the target through solid cloud cover, but it did so with only

11 aircraft. Of the 21 slated for the raid, three failed to take-off, six aborted and one failed to attack due to a malfunctioning bomb release mechanism. One probable hit on a merchant vessel in the harbour south of the aiming point was reported.

The pace of operations was taking its toll on aircraft readiness. Only 12 aircraft were dispatched for the next mission, on 23 November against St Nazaire. They arrived over the target at 1330 hrs, four hours after take-off, and dropped 23 2000-lb HE bombs from 20,800 ft, with hits reported throughout the dock area. The B-17s encountered intense flak over the target, and this led to a bizarre incident in the 359th's lead ship, 41-24609 *HOLY MACKEREL*, flown by Maj George Robinson. Flak badly damaged the aircraft's nose, knocking out the intercom system and causing red hydraulic fluid to leak near the navigator, Capt Harold Fulghum. He must have assumed that it was blood, and that the pilots had been killed, because he baled out and was last seen descending into the city amid the flak bursts. He survived to become a PoW.

Five other men in four crews were injured by flak. The mission was further marred by the loss of the group's first aircraft, the 359th's 41-24568 *Lady Fairweather*, during attacks on the formation by 30+ Fw 190s. They came in groups of two and three immediately after the 303rd had left the flak over the target. *Lady Fairweather* descended in flames and crashed into the Bay of Biscay, killing all on board.

The 303rd did not fly another mission until 6 December due partly to bad weather, which caused missions to be cancelled on 28 November and 3 December. The mission on the 6th was against the carriage and wagon works at Lille, and was led by Wallace, again flying with Lyle in *GOULD SOLDIER*. The group dispatched 20 aircraft, but aborts reduced this to 15 over the target. Light flak was encountered and there was good Spitfire cover against attacks by 20+ enemy aircraft. All bombers returned to base.

Five days earlier Gen Eaker has been promoted to command the Eighth, freeing Spaatz to serve as Eisenhower's deputy chief of staff for air in the Mediterranean, where Operation *Torch* and the invasion of North Africa were in progress. This change signalled an increase in the vigour with which the daylight bombing campaign was pursued. Soon Germany itself would be the target of the Eighth's B-17s.



B-17F 41-24609 BN-Q *HOLY MACKEREL* of the 359th BS is seen after the St Nazaire mission on 23 November 1942, when the lead navigator baled out prematurely – an incident after which the aircraft could easily have been named. It has been modified to take tandem twin 0.50-cal machine guns in the nose, making it unsuitable for lead ship duties. Originally assigned to 1Lt Eric Eyster's crew, *HOLY MACKEREL* was lost to fighters near Rouen, France, on 4 April 1943. The groundcrew is unidentified

TARGET GERMANY

The 303rd BG dispatched 20 aircraft for its next mission on 12 December 1942 against an air depot at Romilly-sur-Seine, but two aircraft aborted almost immediately and another six turned back later due to mechanical problems. On the way in the group was attacked by about 40 Bf 109s and Fw 190s, which knocked down two B-17s about 25 miles east of Paris. 41-24582 *One O'Clock Jump*, with Capt William Frost's 358th crew, went down in a flat spin dogged by a single Fw 190 as nine parachutes were seen to open. Five men became PoWs, three evaded captivity and eventually returned to Molesworth, but two were killed.

The other aircraft lost was 41-24585 *Wulfe Hound*, flown by 1Lt Paul Flickenger's crew of the 360th BS. It dived out of formation five minutes after *One O'Clock Jump*, heading back towards the French coast trailed by five Fw 190s. But Flickenger managed to lose the fighters in clouds and made a wheels-up landing in a hayfield. Although the ball-turret was pointing down, and the crew did everything possible to sabotage the aircraft before fleeing into a nearby wood, *Wulfe Hound* made history as the first B-17 to be captured sufficiently intact for the Germans to repair and fly. It was repainted in German markings, used to familiarise Luftwaffe fighter pilots with the B-17's capabilities and otherwise employed in 'secret' operations by *Kampfgeschwader 200*, the Luftwaffe's 'spook' unit.

Six of the crew escaped and evaded capture. Among the four who became prisoners was Sgt Kurtenbach who had claimed the group's first aerial victory. As a PoW, Kurtenbach became the 'man of confidence' at the enlisted-men's camps in which he was detained, rendering great service as adviser to newcomers and planner of escapes. After repatriation, he received the Legion of Merit for exemplary leadership and conduct.

When the group reached Romilly-sur-Seine, the target was obscured by cloud and Rouen was attacked on the return flight. Only seven aircraft dropped their bombs because three B-17s couldn't find the target and brought their bombs back. The inefficiency of each aircraft's bombardier aiming separately was becoming all too evident.

There were no more missions until the 20th, but in the meantime there was an event of great consequence for the Eighth. Eaker was flown under conditions of utmost secrecy to Casablanca, where he would successfully make the case for 'around-the-clock' bombing – strategic daylight precision bombing by the Eighth, while the RAF continued night-bombing. In a strong vote of confidence, 1st Col Marion and Capt Lyle, together with Lyle's navigator and five enlisted men in his crew, were selected to fly Eaker and his staff to Africa. They left Molesworth on 10 December in *OOOLD SOLJER* and returned on the 29th, receiving a letter of commendation from Eaker for their 'thoroughly superior performance during the long and arduous journey'.

The 20 December mission meant a return to the air depot at Romilly-sur-Seine. Again, the group suffered a high abortion rate – seven out of 21 – but those which did reach the target caused substantial damage. Strike photos confirmed a number of direct hits, but the group paid for its success

with numerous fighter attacks. 41-24566 *Zombie* of the 359th BS was shot up badly enough to force it to ditch in the English Channel with the loss of Lt O S Witt's entire crew. 41-24581 *THE 8 BALL* of the 358th BS, flown by Capt William Calhoun with Maj Eugene Romig as co-pilot, was so badly damaged that the crew baled out over England and the pilots belly-landed the ship at Bovingdon – it was duly written off. Before the year was out Calhoun received replacement 41-24635, named *THE 8 BALL Mk II*, which would become one of the group's most famous B-17s.

Christmas 1942 came and went with turkey dinner and relief from practice missions due to bad weather that lasted until 29 December. The year's final mission was flown the next day against the Lorient U-boat pens, with good bombing reported and mediocre fighter opposition. No group B-17s were lost. The year ended with the arrival of three replacement aircraft, and Capt Lyle becoming CO of the 360th BS.

1943 would be a year of supreme challenge for the 303rd and the Eighth as American airmen continued to struggle with the deadly challenge of accurate bombing and getting home alive.

The year did not begin well. On 3 January the 303rd led a mission against 'flak city' (St Nazaire), with Wallace flying in lead ship 41-24619 *S-for-Sugar* of the 427th BS. He was now doing double-duty as group CO and commander of the 102nd Provisional Bombardment Combat Wing (PBCW), comprising the 303rd and 305th BGs. Flying with him to get a first-hand look at combat was Brig Gen Haywood Hansell Jr, newly-appointed CO of the 1st BW, of which the 102nd PBCW was a part. The group dispatched 17 aircraft and had three aborts. In a crystal clear, but freezing cold, sky the 14 B-17s flew over the target into a hell of black flak bursts and fighters. A record total of four 303rd aircraft, one from each squadron, was lost.

Original nose art. Shot down over St Nazaire, B-17F 41-24620 *snap! crackle! pop!* crashed in La Baule-Escoulrac forest. The Germans hung this trophy in 'Georamza', a villa in St Nazaire, which overlooks the sea from a cliff opposite the Loire estuary. At war's end the aircraft, together with a piece of an RAF bomber adorned with a painted squadron crest, were recovered from rocks below the cliff by Frenchman, Michael Harouet. The nose art was restored in 1989



B-17F 41-24577 VK-D HELL'S ANGELS of the 358th BS was the first Fortress in the European theatre to complete 25 missions. The 'Angel on Roller Skates' nose art was designed by PFC Bernard Kastenbaum, who painted it on the waist, but it was removed when fuselage code letters were located there. The aircraft flew for some time without its artwork, but after Kastenbaum's transfer to 1st BW, it was repainted on the nose by S/Sgt Harold Godwin, Capt Irl Baldwin's tail-gunner

The first to go was the 427th's 41-24517 *Kali*, which exploded in mid-air, killing nine members of Lt William Goetz's crew together and the squadron CO, Maj Charles Sheridan. Next was the 360th BS's *snap! crackle! pop!* with seven crew killed and three survivors who became PoWs. One, S/Sgt Alan McGee of 1Lt Arthur Adams's crew, had a truly miraculous survival. His ball-turret and chest parachute were both ruined by flak and he was also wounded. He headed towards the radio-room in search of a new chute when the aircraft received another direct hit that put it into a tight spin. Wounded again, McGee blacked out and was somehow tossed out of the radio-room hatch. He fell 20,000ft *without a parachute*, smashing through the glass roof of St Nazaire railway station and getting tangled up in the girders. There he was found alive but severely injured, receiving hospital treatment and spending the rest of the war in a PoW camp. Reunited with his fellow veterans for the first time at the 1997 Pittsburgh 303rd reunion, he declared, 'I don't know how I got there but here I am, thanks to God.'

Those in the 358th's 41-24526 *Leapin' Liz* were not blessed with the same good fortune. Crippled by fighter attacks, the aircraft ditched in the Bay of Biscay and 1Lt James Clark's entire crew perished. Finally, the 359th's 41-24608 *Yehudi*, piloted by 1Lt Frank Saunders, was badly damaged by flak and ditched. Only the pilot and navigator survived.

This was probably the mission when 41-24577 *HELL'S ANGELS* got its nickname. Capt Irl Baldwin, the bomber's first pilot, reportedly told the crew over the intercom that he was thinking about a name for their B-17. He suggested 'Hell's Angels', the title of a popular World War I war film. When another crewman commented, 'This is the closest to hell that angels will ever get', everyone agreed the name fitted.

After the mission Gen Hanson complimented the crews on their bravery, but was measured in his remarks about the gunnery and bombing. Assigned to the 303rd at this time was Sgt Peter Zimba, who worked in technical supply in the 427th BS's ground echelon. He kept a diary whilst in the ETO, and this offers a unique perspective on these difficult times, and perhaps an explanation of Hanson's remarks:

'I slept out in the supply shack. The combat men started to come in about 0530 hrs for flashlight batteries. One fellow came in dressed in an English heated suit he was going to try out on the mission that morning. He never came back. Four aeroplanes were lost. The old man (Maj Sheridan) was shot down in *Kali*, so was Lt Goetz, a swell guy. Four 190s, two of them, came in one at "ten o'clock", another at "twelve o'clock". Flak knocked out one engine and the aeroplane caught on fire and





B-17F 41-24603 BN-Y THE GREEN HORNET of the 359th BS was lost on 23 January 1943. It is seen here with 2Lt Ellis Sanderson's original crew. They are, back row from left to right, 2Lt Sanderson (pilot, PoW), 2Lt Horace Bowman (co-pilot, PoW), 2Lt John W Spence (navigator, evaded capture), 2Lt John W Plummer (bombardier), and front row from left to right, S/Sgt Sidney Devers (engineer, evaded capture), S/Sgt Miles Jones (radio operator, evaded capture), Sgt Harry Swanson (right waist gunner, PoW), Sgt Frank Greene (ball turret gunner, evaded capture) and Sgt Joseph Markiewicz (tail gunner, KIA). Not in the photo is Sgt Carlos Silva, the left waist gunner, who became a PoW

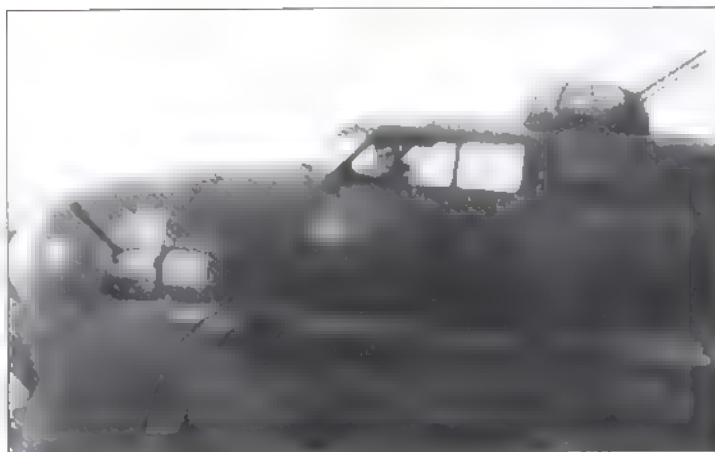
exploded. It went on for about 400 yards, then it went into the death dive and nobody got out. Fws closed in after it and riddled it with cannon shells and machine gun fire. Fellows that jumped out of the other squadron ships were riddled by the Fws. The raid was a failure, as some B-17s dropped their bombs and others didn't. The general's and the colonel's (Hansell and Wallace's) aeroplane didn't drop theirs - they were here to study a new defence for the B-17F. The general's aeroplane was riddled with machine gun fire. I got 610 (41-24610 *JOE BITSPLEK II*) a new left elevator. Boy, this was some day.'

'Joe Bitsplk', incidentally, was a fictional character known for perennial 'screw ups'.

Zimba was perceptive. This was the first mission on which the 305th BG tried out a new 18- to 21-aircraft 'combat box' formation developed by its CO, Col Curtis LeMay. This tight formation maximised the mutual defensive fire of the B-17, and allowed the entire group to drop bombs on the aim of the bombardier in the lead ship. It was adopted by the 303rd on its next raid, and remained in use until May 1944.

Due to bad weather, that next mission was not flown until 13 January, against locomotive works at Lille. It was notable as the first mission on which a replacement crew (Lt Sanford Smith's) flew a replacement aircraft, *THE 8 BALL Mk II*. There was only one abort, and 18 aircraft bombed without incident and with little harassment from fighters, which kept their distance from the new formation. But death still stalked the formation. In *Joe Bitsplk II*, tail gunner S/Sgt Paul Ferguson failed to answer an intercom check. He had died from anoxia due to oxygen system failure.

The next mission, on the 23rd, was a 21-aircraft effort (with one abort) against the Lorient U-boat pens. It was a debacle, partly because another unit dropped its bombs over the 303rd, scattering the formation. Five aircraft were lost. 41-24580 *Hell Cat* of the 358th, attacked by fighters, was last seen between Brest and the coast with its number four engine feathered and number one smoking. It went down with 1Lt Oran O'Connor's crew into the Bay of Biscay and eight crewmen were captured but two escaped.



41-24603 *THE GREEN HORNET* of the 359th BS lost three engines to flak and was finished off by Fw 190s in a head-on attack. After the crew baled out, the pilot and co-pilot crash-landed the ship on the side of a hill at Kergolay, near the town of Motreff. Pilot 1Lt Ellis Sanderson lost some fingers. Half the crew evaded capture but the rest became PoWs.

Bombs from the overhead formation hit 41-24567 *Beats Me* of the 360th BS, which crashed in the town of Pluvigner, killing all but three crew. The 427th BS's 41-24584 *Susie* was lost to fighters with 1Lt Harry Robey's crew, of which two escaped, six were captured and two were killed. 41-24607 *Jerry Jinx* was also downed by fighters, 1Lt Ehle Reher's 11-man crew being killed when it ditched in the Bay of Biscay. Only 13 aircraft bombed the primary target and 12 returned to base. Many had lost an engine, and one B-17 had two feathered props. Five were damaged, three extensively. Four landed, or crash-landed, away from Molesworth.

41-24606 *Werewolf* of the 358th BS limped home on just one engine. After his crew baled out over England, 1Lt George Oxrider landed in the grounds of a mental hospital at Dawlish. Remarkably, *Werewolf* was repaired and flown out on a specially-constructed makeshift runway. Its days with the 303rd were over, but the bomber received a complete overhaul from Eighth Service Command and was issued to the 91st BGI. 1Lt Ross Bales safely crash-landed the 359th BS's badly damaged 41-24565 *IDAHO POTATO PEELER* at Chipping Warden with no crew casualties. It too was turned over to Service Command for repairs and eventually re-joined the group. The next day, Bales' crew received replacement B-17F 42-5234 which they promptly named *IDAHO POTATO PEELER KIDS*, although this was soon changed to *F.D.R.'s POTATO PEELER KIDS* at the insistence of a public relations-minded senior officer.

The 360th BS's 41-24579 *THUMPER* was a write-off when its pilot, 1Lt John Castle, and co-pilot made a wheels-up crash-landing at Lulsgate Bottom. The B-17's back was broken when the ball-turret framework was forced up on impact. The other eight crewmen baled out, but the right waist gunner was killed when his chute failed to open. Finally, Capt Billy Southworth landed the 427th BS's 41-24587 *Bud Check* at Exeter despite the loss of the No 3 engine and flak and fighter damage to both wings.

The mood was black at Molesworth that evening. As Mel Schulstad recalls:

The 359th BS's B-17F 41-24565 BN-P *Idaho Potato Peeler* was assigned to 1Lt Ross Bales (an Idaho native, hence its nickname) and his crew. Part of the bomber's name can be seen below the large port nose window. The other slogans and graffiti are illegible. The B-17 was damaged in a crash-landing at Chipping Warden on 23 January 1943, and after being repaired 41-24565 was renamed *Ramblin' Wreck*, although it retained the BN-P fuselage code. The bomber was subsequently lost over Gelsenkirchen on 11 November 1943

Named after the Disney character in the animated classic *Bambi*, B-17F 41-24579 PU-F *THUMPER* of the 360th BS carried this modest nose art. It was written-off in a crash-landing on 23 January 1943





B-17F 42-5234 BN-P F.D.R.'s POTATO PEELER KIDS, also known as IDAHO POTATO PEELER KIDS, served with of the 359th BS. Shown here with its groundcrew, the bomber was received on 24 January 1943 and assigned to 1Lt Bales' crew, who gave the Fortress its distinctive nickname. A senior officer insisted that F.D.R.'s be substituted for IDAHO, and this change was duly made on President Roosevelt's birthday

'This was a very trying period for our entire group. Our losses were heavy, and we had very few replacements. After you lose five aircraft on one mission, the line in the mess hall is visibly shorter. It's a very personal thing.'

It was especially so for Schulstad, the original pilot of *Bears Me*. He had been grounded by flu, and lost his entire crew when a new pilot filled in for him on the mission. That same day the CO, Col Wallace, was hospitalised with severe muscle stiffness in the chest. Clearly the 303rd was at one of the lowest points in its history.

It is a tribute to all in the group that less than a week later – after the Casablanca Conference's endorsement of the Combined Bomber Offensive, following Gen Baker's appeal to Churchill – that the 303rd participated in the first attack against Germany itself. Indeed, although there is still controversy about which group was the first to bomb Germany, it may have been the 'Hell's Angels' during the 27 January mission to Wilhelmshaven.

Brig Gen Frank A Armstrong Jr and the 306th BG, the closest real-life counterparts to 'Gen Frank Savage' and the hard luck 918th BG in the movie *12 O'Clock High*, are officially credited with having dropped the first bombs on German soil at 1110 hrs. The 303rd reportedly dropped its bombs at 1111 hrs! But there is more to the story than that. The mission was actually to attack a power station in Vegesack, a shipyard city on the Weser River some 20 miles north of Bremen. Armstrong was leading the 101st PBCW, comprising the 306th and 91st BGs, followed by the 102nd PBCW, made up of the 303rd and 305th. The B-24s of the 44th BG were sent on a diversion, their normal role.

1: Col Marion, who was acting group CO, and who would officially replace Wallace on 12 February, was leading the 303rd with Lyle in

First to bomb Germany? Who was first is still open to debate, but the 303rd's participation in the first Eighth Air Force attack on the Third Reich on 27 January 1943 provided a much-needed boost in morale to a unit recently decimated by losses. Capt Lewis Lyle's crew is shown standing before *OOOLD SOLJER*. Lt Col Charles Marion, co-pilot and acting group CO, is standing in the back row, far right, with Lyle next to him. Of interest is the undersized national insignia that has been painted onto *OOOLD SOLJER*'s waist



OOOLD SOLJER. The 303rd put up only 11 aircraft because of its recent losses, and had suffered three aborts by the time the B-17s arrived over a cloud-shrouded Vegesack. Armstrong ordered the bombers to head for Wilhelmshaven, the target of last resort. The port area was bombed amid clouds, fighters, flak and much confusion. Buried in the 303rd archives is this intriguing entry from Lyle's mission notebook, made immediately afterwards:

'27 January, first mission to Germany proper. Target Bremen. Armstrong leading and when found target ten-tenths, directed we go to secondary, Wilhelmshaven, where number two group and I turned directly to target and 303rd was first to bomb. A real disaster, aeroplanes aborting, salvoing bombs. Fighters made several attacks on us after bombing, took evasive action – no losses.'

There were many reporters at Mulesworth to cover this historic event when the bombers returned and the low spirits in the ranks were replaced by elation over the group's achievement. Great trials and losses lay ahead as the Eighth geared up for sustained bombing offensives against German targets in the summer and autumn of 1943. But the 303rd will always take pride of place as one of the groups to strike this first psychologically critical blow against 'Target Germany'.

B-17F 41-25541 VK-B *Spook* of the 358th BS returned to base on 27 January 1943 peppered with holes. Here, M/Sgt Donald Ganessey, the bomber's groundcrew chief, points to these holes 'from Germany'. However, it appears that this damage was actually caused in a bizarre accident. When the top-turret gunner of Lt Oxrider's crew test-fired his guns the left life raft storage door opened and the raft struck the left waist gun, which in turn flew off its post and started firing wildly. The tail gunner, S/Sgt James Sadler, received two bullet holes in the right buttock (*National Archives*)



MASTERING THE ART

Important as that first strike against Germany had been, the 303rd BG and the Eighth Air Force still had much to learn about high altitude operations in winter. As Mel Schulstad recalls:

'We knew so little about what we were being ordered to undertake. It simply hadn't been done before. We didn't realise how deadly the little things could be. A crew would go up and someone would forget linings for his boots or something and we'd say, "It's okay, let's go", and he'd come back with frozen feet.'

The record bears Schulstad out. On 2 February 1943 the group dispatched 12 aircraft against Hamm. 42-2973 *IZA-VAILABLE* did not even get off the ground because its brakes failed and the bomber became mired in off-runway mud. 41-24605 *Knockout Dropper* returned because someone forgot to tighten a fuel-tank cap. Two gunners got frozen hands on *THE 8 BALL Mk II* and it too returned. In 41-24562 *Sky Wolf* Capt Carl Morales's ball-turret gunner, Sgt Albert Carroll, got frozen feet. He had been wearing a British electric flying suit and broke the male plug trying to fit it into the female one. 41-24558 *Hunga Dunga's* ball-turret gunner also got frozen feet due to an electrical short in his flying boots. In *HOLY MACKEREL*, the problem was not frozen gunners but frozen guns, so this B-17 had to return too. With only six aircraft continuing, the group was fortunate that the operation was recalled by 1st BW due to atrocious weather.

B-17F 42-2973 PU-G *IZA-VAILABLE* forms the backdrop for this group shot of the 360th BS Engineering Department. This aircraft, of the 360th BS, was one of the first replacements to join the 303rd, on 14 January 1943. It won fame as the group B-17F with the third highest mission total, 54, outdone only by 41-24605 *KNOCK-OUT DROPPER* with 75 and 41-24561 *THE DUCHESS* with 59. This photograph was taken a few days before the veteran B-17 returned to the USA on 11 April 1944



B-17F 41-24562 VK-A *Sky Wolf* of the 358th BS won praise as an extremely 'good aeroplane' from all who flew it. The bomber's original crew, led by Lt Carl Morales, completed its 25-mission tour. They are, back row from left to right, Morales (pilot), Lt Calvin Swatter (co-pilot), Lt Hubert Miller (navigator) and Lt Frank Zasadi (bombardier), and front row, left to right, S/Sgt Max Westfall (waist gunner), T/Sgt Francis Hinds (engineer), S/Sgt John Hill (waist gunner), T/Sgt Francis Burns (radio operator), S/Sgt Albert Carroll (ball turret gunner) and S/Sgt Robert Blake (tail gunner) (*Francis Hinds*)



Hamm was bombed two days later, but the raid was another high-abort exercise with only six group aircraft reaching the target. 41-24569 *Memphis Tot* of the 427th BS turned back over Holland due to frozen guns and was caught by fighters over the North Sea. The bomber broke apart on ditching and its six survivors were lucky to be fished out of the freezing water by a Dutch fishing boat to become PoWs. To and from the target area the group had running clashes with fighters, including the 303rd's first encounters with twin-engined Bf 110s and Ju 88s. Over the target only five aircraft bombed because *OOOLD SOI JFR*, with Lt Col Marion and Capt Lyle's crew on board, had a faulty bomb release mechanism.

Shortly after bomb release Lt James McDonald's crew in *War Bride* both replacements which joined the 358th BS on 8 January – suffered vicious fighter attacks resulting in multiple cannon strikes in the cockpit, nose, tail gunner's position and vertical stabiliser. Despite massive damage, nobody was killed, although the co-pilot suffered facial cuts and a severe back laceration from 20 mm shrapnel. *War Bride* made it home and exacted some 'payback' against an Fw 190 when the bombardier and top-turret gunner succeeded in knocking pieces from the fighter's cowlings, right aileron and wing.

It was becoming clear that many gunners still badly needed training, and group engineering officer, Capt Melvin McCoy, noted that much of the battle damage being inflicted on his aircraft was actually coming from the B-17s' own 0.50-cal machine guns! Mel Schulstad, now without a crew, was a natural to address this problem. As a former enlisted man – he had joined in May 1939 – Schulstad had attended armourers' school and was quite familiar with the 0.50-cal guns. As one of the officers assigned to teach the men the basics of aerial gunnery, Schulstad recalls:

'We were hampered by the very unrealistic training we got back in the States. It made no sense trying to teach aerial gunnery by having the men shoot from a stationary skeet location on the ground. Another stupid practice was to have them fire at a towed target sleeve travelling at the same speed and bearing as their aeroplane was. The fighters came at us at all



angles and speeds, and our own bullets got some forward motion from our own aircraft, so having the men rely on tracers was self-defeating. As I remember, we had some professor from a big-name US university come to Molesworth to deliver lectures on the dynamics of the firing environment our gunners faced, although I think what aided us more than anything else was the sheer volume of fire our people put out.'

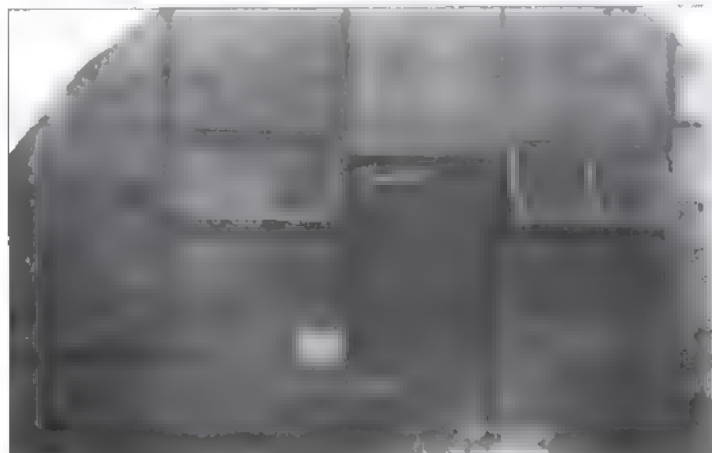
Perhaps the best way to grasp the complexity of the problem is to understand that in some situations, such as when a fighter was making a 'seven o'clock' attack on a B-17's tail, it was necessary for the gunner to aim behind the fighter to have any chance of hitting it. However, the gunners did finally understand because their lives depended on learning. The hard-won lessons of combat were reflected in far more realistic training for new replacement crews. Gunners joining the group in late spring were also trained to shoot skeet, but their firing platforms were moving flatbed trucks. By the end of the war there was the ultimate combat simulation in the form of heavily-armoured Bell RP-63 'Pinball' fighter aircraft. These were painted bright orange and had lights that flashed when the aircraft were hit by frangible practice ammunition.

Another hard lesson learned was never leave the formation to help a straggler. Lt Lawrence Dunnica in 41-24541 *Spook* from the 358th BS tried this on the return from St Nazaire on 16 February 1943. The crew agreed to assist a 306th straggler besieged by fighters near the French coast. The second lone B-17 drew fighters like sharks as five BF 109s instantly became 15. The 306th crew baled out, leaving Dunnica's to face

B-17F 42-5360 VK-Q *War Bride*, also known as *Old Faithful*, was assigned to the 358th BS on 3 January 1943. It is seen here on 20 July with 1Lt John Hendry's crew, who joined the 303rd on 21 June 1943. At this time the crew was listed as being led by Lt Kruse, for he was serving as 'instructor pilot', guiding Hendry's men through their first missions



B-17F 41-24541 VK-B *Spook* of the 358th BS was lost on 16 February 1943 with 1Lt Lawrence Dunnica's crew. The latter are pictured here, and they are, back row from left to right, Dunnica (pilot, KIA), 2Lt Orson Pacey (co-pilot, PoW), 2Lt Leonard Thornton (navigator, KIA) and 2Lt James Montgomery (bombardier, not on mission), and in the front row, left to right, are T/Sgt Harry Tucker (engineer, PoW), Sgt Phillip Cascio (ball turret gunner, PoW), Sgt Bertis Holland (radio operator, KIA), S/Sgt Robert Dew (right waist gunner, KIA) and Sgt Claude Taylor (tail gunner, KIA). Not pictured are the tenth original crewmember, Sgt Wayne Hatcher (left waist gunner, KIA) and 1Lt R O Scheible (bombardier, PoW) who was flying with Dunnica's crew that day

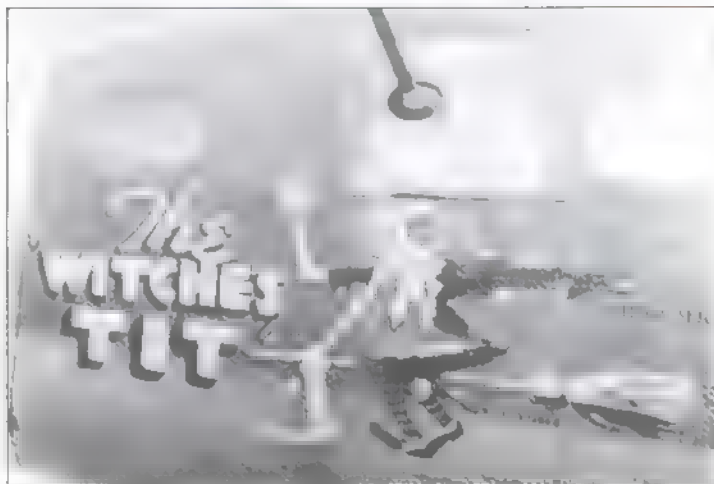


Empty. This Quonset hut housed the enlisted aircrews of three original 358th aircraft, as can be seen from mission scores on the door top, *Hunga Dunga* (centre), *SKY WOLF* (bottom) and *Spook*. It was tough returning to barracks to see the empty bunks of missing comrades. *Hunga Dunga* was lost on 18 March 1943, little more than a month after *Spook* (Francis Hinds)



The lost crew of B-17F 42-2967 PU-G *SHAK-HAK* of the 360th BS. The bomber was downed with all hands on 18 February 1943. Pictured, back row from left to right, are 1Lt William Breed (pilot), 2Lt Harry Sample Jr (co-pilot), 2Lt Homer Allen (navigator) and 2Lt Homer Santerre (bombardier), and front row, not in order, T/Sgt Stanley Putala (engineer), T/Sgt Joseph Herbert (radio operator), S/Sgt Samuel Easter (right waist gunner, not on mission), S/Sgt James H Lentz (ball turret gunner) and S/Sgt Mathias A Kuffel (tail gunner). The significance of the number '4' next to the bomber's nickname is unknown

The notorious nose art of B-17F 42-5382 PU-B *The "WITCHE'S TIT"* of the 360th BS was carried on both sides of the fuselage. The artist was 'A Steele'



a running fight over the Channel that ended in the water. Dunnica died trying to escape, but three survivors endured strafing and hours of tossing in a raft before they drifted on to the French coast and into captivity. 42-2967 *SHAK-HAK* from the 360th BS also fell to fighters and ditched near Brest. There were no survivors from Lt William Breed's crew. However, the bombing was good and the group got credit for four enemy fighters destroyed.

On 22 February, five replacement crews arrived and three days later, five new B-17s. They included 42-5382 *The "WITCHE'S TIT"*, 42-5393 *THUMPER AGAIN* (replacing *THUMPER*) and 42-5432 *"THE HUNTING CLUB"*. The three had elaborate artwork, reflecting a

A great aerial view of *The "WITCHE'S TIT"*, this photograph being the only known view to show the bomber's distinctive tail art. This shot remains undated



B-17F 42-5393 PU-G **THUMPER AGAIN**, also known as **THE LITTLE WOMAN** and *Just for LAFFS*, of the 360th BS was photographed returning from a recalled mission to Le Mans on 15 June 1943. The horizontal line behind the nose art is a row of bombs acting as mission tally. The reason for *The Little Woman* alias is obvious from the tail art



A close-up of **THE LITTLE WOMAN** tail art on **THUMPER AGAIN**. The artist is unknown



THUMPER AGAIN was also named *Just for LAFFS*, as seen below the damaged pilot's window from the *Big Week* raid on 22 February 1944. It is not known when this third name was applied



B-17F 42-5432 VK-B '**THE HUNTING CLUB**' of the 358th BS was decorated with tail art inspired by a Disney cartoon of 'Donald Duck's' hunting misadventures. The small inscription reads '*Food Hunting*'. The artwork's integration into the yellow call-letter shows additional artistry. **The "WITCHES' TIT"** and **THE LITTLE WOMAN** ignored this requirement. '**THE HUNTING CLUB**' was lost on 22 June 1943 over Hamburg



growing *esprit-de-corps* in the ranks. On 26 February, the 303rd entered the public eye, albeit anonymously, in news features from 'A Flying Fortress Base Somewhere In England'. Walter Cronkite flew with Capt Glenn Hagenbuch, the 427th BS CO, in squadron flagship *S-for-Sugar*, while Lyle's crew, in *OOOLD SOLJER*, took Homer Biggert of *The New York Herald Tribune*. Both reporters succeeded in expressing the fear, tension and spectacle that gripped anyone encountering flak and fighter attacks for the first time. Despite seven aborts, 12 303rd aircraft bombed the secondary target, Wilhelmshaven, after cloud obscured the primary, Bremen. Most fighter attacks were aimed at stragglers in the three other



B-17 and two B-24 groups involved in this maximum-effort attack. The 303rd returned without loss.

The mission underlined the most important lesson for any bomb group flying in the European theatre. The tighter and more intimidating the group's defensive formation, the more likely the Germans would look elsewhere for easier pickings. Numerous Spitfire escorts made the month's final mission, against Brest on 27th, an easy one. There was only one abort. Fifteen group aircraft bombed successfully and returned home safely. But as the month drew to a close the Eighth faced a major problem throughout its bomb groups. All had high abort levels because of the difficulties their groundcrews were now facing in coping with both battle damage and the growing pace of operations. Besides, aircrews were still being lost at a rate greater than the flow of replacements. It came as little surprise when, in early-March, Arnold received a report listing the Luftwaffe as the Eighth's top priority target in the combined bomber offensive. The Eighth was locked in a growing, ever-more-bloody war of attrition. Whoever ran out of men or aircraft first would lose.

Early March 1943 also saw the 303rd increasing the percentage of aircraft available. The group flew a mission to Rotterdam on the 4th, attacking marshalling yards as a target of last resort with 16 aircraft and returning without loss. There were only two aborts. On the 6th the group returned to Lorient and bombed with 17 aircraft, again with only two

B-17F 41-24619 GN-S *S-for-Sugar* of the 427th BS was the squadron flagship. Walter Cronkite flew in it with Capt Glenn Hagenbuch's crew on the 26 February 1943 Wilhelmshaven raid, and this photo dates from the late-summer or early autumn of 1943. Of interest is the medium green 42 colour showing through the white triangle-C marking on the tail and the contrast between the white bars and grey star on the upper right wing. The 427th BS 'Bugs Bunny' symbol can just be seen on the nose (Lorraine Shelhamer)



The groundcrew of B-17F 42-5434 PU-J *LADY LUCK* of the 360th BS, assigned on 6 March 1943. The small lettering behind *LADY LUCK*, directly under the large port window, spells *SHAD-RACK*. Known groundcrew are M/Sgt Walter Melton, crew chief (back row, third from left), Sgt Joseph Conklin (front row, third from left) and T/Sgt Meyer 'Mike' Levin (front row, far right)



Sgt Samuel P Rodman of *LADY LUCK*'s original groundcrew paints its tail art

Hera today - the rose at *LADY LUCK*'s waist was a particularly nice touch . . .

aborts. This time, however, an Fw 190 attacking out of the sun surprised the group and knocked out the No 1 engine on '262', a B-17F of the 360th. It lagged behind the formation and was last seen near the French coast. The aircraft ditched in the sea 40 miles off Lorient. 11a M E Plocher's crew (two of whom were killed while eight survived to become PoWs) had the dubious distinction of being in the first unnamed 303rd B-17 to be lost in combat.

That afternoon and the next day the group received five replacement aircraft, including 42-5434 *Lady Luck*, 42-5483 *Red Ass* and 42-29573 "*Two Beauties*". The last B-17 soon boasted what, in the author's opinion, was the sexiest artwork ever to grace a combat aircraft. The next operation, on 12 March, was against a marshalling yard at Rouen. While there were six aborts, the 303rd received good fighter support, and 12 B-17s dropped their bombs squarely on target. Spitfires also provided escort the next day against another marshalling yard at Amiens. While there was only one abort, the group's 18 aircraft did poorly on the bomb-run due to eight-tenths cloud and haze. Still, there had been no losses in either mission.

Then came 18 March. The target was a U-boat yard at Vegesack. The 303rd was lead group at the head of 76 B-17s and 27 B-24s. For the first time, the B-17s were using automatic flight control equipment (AFCE) in combat. AFCE allowed the bombardier to fly the aircraft on the bomb run by adjusting knobs on the Norden bombsight. Perhaps because of this, bombing was by squadron. The 359th was the high squadron, and leading it was Capt Harold Strouse's crew, one of the group's originals, in their regular ship 41-24561 *THE DUCHESS*. The bombardier was 22-year-old

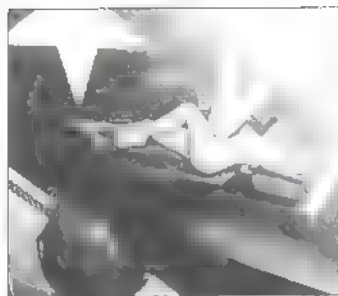




... gone tomorrow – this shows the damage sustained during the group's encounter with the Luftwaffe over Gilze-Rijen on 19 August 1943, and also that *LADY LUCK* had been painted-out and replaced by the 'J' call letter. Only the superstitious would suggest this had something to do with *LADY LUCK*'s demise on 26 September 1943 when a runaway prop threatened to tear a wing off, causing its crew to bale out over England while the aircraft crashed and exploded with a full bomb load

B-17F 42-5483 *Red Ass* PU-F of the 360th BS, this nose art being carried on both sides of the fuselage. *Red Ass* was lost over Bremen on 29 November 1943





B-17F 42-29573 VK-H "TWO BEAUTIES" of the 358th BS was lost in a formation assembly collision with **OOOLD SOLJER** on 31 March, just six days after this photograph was taken

The crew of Medal of Honor recipient 1Lt Jack W Mathis. Pictured, back row from left to right, are 1Lt Harold Stouse (pilot), 1Lt William Neff (ground echelon), 2Lt Squire O'Connor (co-pilot), 2Lt John Shupe (navigator, not on 21 March 1943 Medal of Honor mission) and 1Lt Jack W Mathis (bombardier), and front row, left to right, S/Sgt Eldon Audiss (engineer), S/Sgt Donald Richardson (radio operator), Sgt Theron Tupper (waist gunner), Sgt John Garriott (ball turret gunner) and S/Sgt Calvin Owen (tail gunner). Not pictured are 1Lt Jesse Elliott (navigator) and Sgt Houston Brown Jr (right waist gunner)

B-17F 41-24561 BN-T THE DUCHESS of the 359th BS earned fame not only as the aircraft involved in the first Eighth Air Force Medal of Honor award, but also as the B-17F with the 303rd's second highest mission total - 59. By the time it returned to the US on 7 July 1944, *The Duchess* had served in the Eighth Air Force longer than any other B-17F

1Lt Jack W Mathis of San Angelo, Texas. He had enlisted a year before Pearl Harbor and joined the 303rd at Alamogordo.

As lead group, the 303rd suffered the bulk of fighter attacks, which started near Heligoland. But the gravest danger was flak on the bomb run, which was described as 'intense, heavy, black, concentrated and accurate'. Mathis was crouched over his bombsight, eye pressed against the rubber eyepiece. Less than a minute from the bomb release point there was a large flak explosion against the starboard nose of *THE DUCHESS*. Mathis and the navigator, 1Lt Jesse Elliott, were hurled back nine feet against the aft bulkhead of their nose compartment. Elliott was slightly wounded and dazed, but Mathis received mortal wounds to his right side and abdomen and his right arm was nearly severed below the elbow. Nonetheless, he managed to crawl back to the bombsight, uttering the word 'bombs' just as he released. The word 'away' was completed for him by Elliott, signalling Stouse to resume control of the aircraft.

Fighters resumed their attacks after the bomb run. Stouse told the top-turret gunner, T/Sgt Eldon Audiss, 'as soon as these damn fighters leave, I wish you would go down and check on Jack. I think he's in trouble'. The sight which greeted Audiss was grim. Elliott was sitting in shock at his navigation table and Mathis was slumped over the bombsight, his chest harness entangled in the bombsight's gears as the analogue mechanism



continued to grind away. Audiss cut Mathis loose from the sight, only to discover that the bombardier was dead.

The group's bombing had been highly accurate, damaging seven U-boats and putting the shipyard out of operation for months. Slightly less than three months later, on 12 July, Jack Mathis was awarded a posthumous Medal of Honor to become the Eighth's first recipient. Mathis was far from being the only casualty on this raid, however.

Hunga Dunga of the 358th was lost to flak with Lt C N Austin's crew. They were one of three 92th BG crews on temporary loan, making up for a shortfall in 303rd aircrews. An unnamed 360th B-17F crash-landed in a field three miles south-west of Molesworth and was written off. *Miss Bea Haven* of the 359th (Lt Guy McClung) crash-landed in Norfolk with three wounded – the aircraft was repaired. There were seven more wounded on the 303rd B-17s which returned to Molesworth. There, Mark Mathis, a rated bombardier in B-26s, was awaiting *THE DUCHESS*'s return to greet his brother. When Mark learned of Jack's fate he immediately requested a transfer to the 303rd to take his place in *THE DUCHESS*. He got his wish, in part – he was assigned to Lt Fred Bales' crew in *F.D.R.'s POTATO PEELER KIDS*.

The group returned to Wilhelmshaven on 23 March, led by Capt Morales's crew and Maj Clemens Wurzbach, the 358th BS's CO, in *SKY*

The Morlaes crew of B-17F 41-24562 *VK-A Sky Wolf* of the 358th BS were photographed after completing the 23 March 1943 mission to Wilhelmshaven. They are pictured with Maj Clemens Wurzbach, 358th BS CO, who is in the back row at the base of the 'V'. Immediately below Wurzbach is Sgt Francis Hinds, engineer/top turret gunner (*Francis Hinds*)





Maj Clemens Wurzbach was a rated senior pilot and 358th BS CO from 26 July 1942 to 21 April 1943, when he transferred to the 351st BG. He later commanded the 91st BG. Wurzbach is sitting on ammunition boxes filled with spent 0.50-cal shell casings and has radio earphones on top of his hat. As Francis Hinds recalls, 'I was cleaning my twin 0.50s and he sat and chatted with me after we returned. A great guy, and a great Texan' (*Francis Hinds*)

Wohl. It was a good mission with only three aborts, excellent visibility and a solid pattern of bombs on the target by 15 group B-17s. There were no losses. Another successful raid was achieved on 28 March when the 303rd attacked the Rouen marshalling yards, again with neither aborts nor losses. A telling indicator of the aircrews' growing confidence were the post-mission comments of Capt Irl Baldwin, back from his 18th mission in *HELL'S ANGELS*. 'It's getting to be like a habit. We go over, drop our bombs and fly back. Our bombing is improving all the time.' The 303rd was truly mastering the art of daylight precision bombing.

But there was no room for complacency, as was proved during a mission on 31 March against a shipyard in Rotterdam. In the hands of a new pilot, *OOOLD SOLJER* collided with "*TWO BEAUTS*" in poor visibility during formation assembly. Two in *OOOLD SOLJER* survived and three survived from "*TWO BEAUTS*". It was the first such collision during the Eighth's operations, but it would not be the last. The rest of the raid passed without incident, with 17 aircraft bombing the target, although results were uncertain due to cloud.

On 4 April, Lewis Lyle, now a pilot without a crew, was promoted to major and appointed to command the 360th BS. For the rest of the war he would assume positions of increasing responsibility, and fly with innumerable lead crews, not directing the mission from the co-pilot's seat, but doing that job himself, in addition to flying the aircraft as first pilot. When he

B-17F 42-5341 GN-Q VIOIOUS VIRGIN of the 427th BS was a legendary bomber within the 303rd BG. In service from February 1943, it survived both the first and second Schweinfurt raids. On 19 March 1944, after completing 39 operations, the B-17 was renamed *Scarlet Harlot* and painted with red, white and blue bands on the fuselage and wings, prior to being used as a weather ship and target tug. David Shelhamer, who was the bomber's second Schweinfurt pilot, took this photograph in the autumn of 1943. What was painted out beneath the large olive drab oval remains unrecorded (Lorraine Shelhamer)

wasn't in the cockpit, Lyle could be found trying other crew positions to gain as complete an understanding as possible of what each crewmember needed to do to make the mission succeed. By war's end Lyle was officially credited with 69 missions, but his actual total was in the seventies.

In recognition of his outstanding heroism and leadership in the 303rd between 17 November 1942 and 15 June 1943 Lewis E. Lyle received the Distinguished Service Cross (DSC), the nation's second highest award for military valour. The award is all the more remarkable considering that it is usually given for individual feats of bravery under fire.

On 4 April a maximum effort was mounted against the Renault motor works in Paris, involving all four of the Eighth's B-17 groups. The 303rd contributed 23 aircraft under the command of Lt Col George Robinson, now deputy CO, and Capt Calhoun in *THE 8 BALL Mk II*. Three aircraft aborted, but 20 aircraft bombed the target against moderate flak and 14 fighter attacks. Despite Spitfire support, the German fighters got the 359th's *HOLY MACKEREL* and 11a Eric Lyster's crew, six of whom were killed and four became PoWs.

The mission saw novel Luftwaffe tactics. 21a Lloyd Shirley was bombardier in 42-5341 *VIOIOUS VIRGIN*, a 427th BS replacement acquired on 7 February. He commented:

'I saw what looked like a large shell coming up at us from above. Suddenly, it exploded and a tremendous red burst appeared directly in front of us. I never did see the aeroplane that dropped it, but there wasn't any doubt about it being a bomb from a German fighter.'

This tactic had been reported as early as February by Eighth crews, and its use has been confirmed by Luftwaffe sources. 11a Earl Shaeffer, pilot of 42-5081 *Luscious Lady*, a 427th replacement aircraft received on





B-17F 42-5081 GN-V *Luscious Lady* of the 427th BS was another very well-regarded early replacement in the 427th BS. Seen here undergoing routine engine maintenance, it also flew on both the first and second Schweinfurt raids with Lt Robert Hullar's crew. Note the 38th RS insignia on the wheel hub, a decoration which was also carried on *VICIOUS VIRGIN*

15 February, said 'The bombing was the best ever. My crew claimed that our bombs landed right on the aiming point. That's what we went for, so the trip was a success'.

The group flew on 5 April against the Erfa aircraft works at Antwerp. Maj Wurzbach led again in *Sat Wolt*. There were three aborts. Although the group encountered both twin- and single-engined fighters and some air-to-air bombing, RAF Spitfires provided excellent support. Despite some close calls, the group suffered no losses and 17 aircraft bombed, as did those of the following 305th. Someone must have blundered, though, because the Belgian ambassador-in-exile complained to US authorities about civilian casualties.

This mission was the second for 1Lt George Mackin, assistant group operations officer, who flew in *The Devil Himself* of the 427th BS. Afterwards he commented, 'I was a little scared at first, but we kept so busy that I didn't think of it much after that'. Being 'too busy to be scared' was reported by countless B-17 veterans, and was a principal reason they were able to bear the stress of continued combat.

Increasing aircraft production at home was seen at Molesworth between 6 and 9 April, when no less than ten B-17s arrived for permanent assignment, including *Butch*, 42-29571 *Charley Horse* and 42-3029 *Wallaroo*.

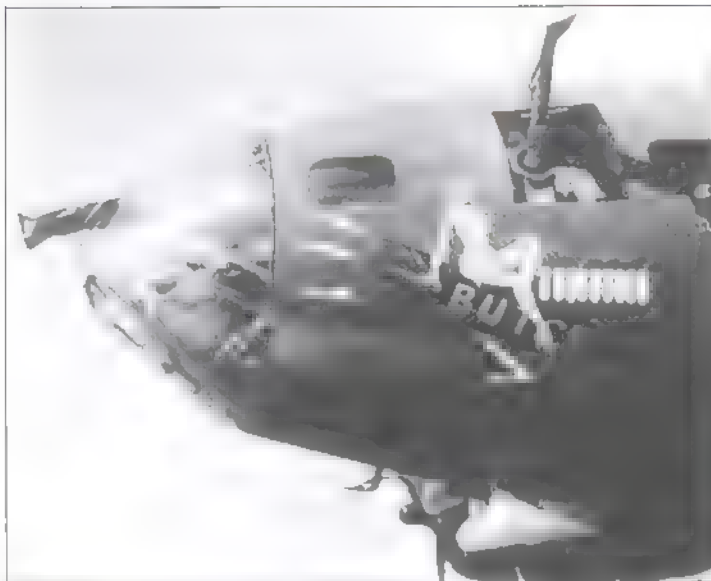
The group attacked a Lorient power station on 16 April. Five aircraft aborted the mission and 16 attacked, but of chief interest was the struggle for survival by 1Lt James McDonald's crew in the 358th's *War Bride*. The group was attacked by 20 to 25 enemy fighters and *War Bride* was in trouble because it dropped out of formation with Nos 1 and 3 engines running rough. Then No 2 died, catching fire on its own. McDonald put the fire out with the built-in CO₂ fire extinguisher system and feathered the prop. Fighters then put 20 mm shells into the left wing between the engines, drastically cutting oil pressure to No 3 and severing propeller pitch cables to both engines.

McDonald's post-mission comment was classic understatement. 'From then on it was touch and go as to whether we would make it home. We couldn't stay with the formation after the enemy aircraft riddled us.' *War Bride* limped to a base in southern England, at times only 20 ft above the waves as the crew fought off two Fw 190s which caught them in

Maj George Mackin, after his second mission on 22 March 1943, looks every inch the complete Eighth aviator from worn flight gear right down to good luck rabbit as he takes a well-earned drink after the sortie. Mackin was promoted to CO of the 358th BS in late-March 1944, but in late January 1945 he was shot-down and became a PoW



B-17F 42-29606 PU-M *BUTCH* of the 360th BS was assigned on 6 April 1943. Initially known as *Toots*, this aircraft had its name changed for some inexplicable reason, although the original nose art was retained. Indeed, the only difference was the new name on the bomb beneath the female figure. Note the groundcrewman inside the nose behind the cheek gun. *BUTCH* was lost to fighters on the 25 June 1943 Hamburg mission



B-17F 42-29571 VK-L '*Charley Horse*' was assigned to the 358th BS on 6 April 1943, and was lost, with 2Lt William Hartigan's crew, on the 20 October 'milk-run' to Düren. Here, it is seen with an earlier crew comprised of, back row, from left to right, Flt Off Elmo Clark (pilot), Lt Donald DeCamp (co-pilot), Lt Robert Galbraith and Lt Ralph Haddock (navigator), and front row, left to right, S/Sgt Charles Doback (waist gunner), S/Sgt William Hembree (engineer), S/Sgt Richard Tracy (waist gunner), S/Sgt Gustof Simon (tail gunner), S/Sgt Curtis Brooke (radio operator) and S/Sgt William Jenkins (tail gunner)



A tough crew - Lt James McDonald's 358th BS crew are seen at the end of their tour on 13 June 1943. They finished their missions largely intact, although the navigator was lost with Lt Dunnica's crew on 16 February 1943 and became a PoW. When McDonald returned to Molesworth on 13 June 1943 he buzzed the field at low altitude and dropped a large towel. His excuse for this infraction of regulations: 'I finished my combat stretch today, so I threw in the towel!' Individual crewmen are unidentified



mid-Channel. They shot one down. All credited McDonald's skill as the main factor behind their return. But the experience provided another valuable lesson to combat crews – never jettison all your ammunition, no matter how much the aircraft's weight must be reduced. The shot-down Fw 190 was splashed with only 50 0.50-cal rounds left in the top-turret.

The group fielded a record 29 aircraft on 17 April in a maximum effort against Focke-Wulf's main factory in Bremen. With 115 bombers dispatched, this represented the Eighth's biggest effort to date. Lyle led the main group formation in the 360th BS's 41-24602 *Yardbird*. The group's ten extra aircraft made up two squadrons of a composite-group formation, with the 305th contributing the third. The mission was surrounded by much publicity generated by the group's public relations staff, because Lt Mark Mathis was flying his first mission in *THE DUCHESS*, and was using his dead brother's bombsight. He said, 'What happened today was just my start'. A similar piece of 'good copy' came from the coincidence that a large piece of flak shell that lodged in *Bad Check*'s number two engine had the number '13' stamped on it, and that it was the 13th mission of the tail-gunner, SSgt Charles Dugan.

Lewis Lyle's post-mission assessment was more to the point:

'You really knew that there was a war going on, flying into what we did today. Flak was by far the worst I have seen. The German fighters were really anxious. Our group, however, did a lot of damage to one of our chief worries – the German fighter plant that we bombed.'

MSgt William B Stamper, a rare NCO bombardier, also provided some perceptive comments:

'We were in perfect formation. The German fighters started to come up as soon as we crossed the German coast. They started on the group ahead of us and really worked them over. The fight went on right over the target. We dropped our bombs and started back. I couldn't see my own bombs drop, but I knew they hit the target. We then flew into the heaviest flak that I have seen, and I have been on a lot of missions. The fighters stayed right with us until we reached the coast. I may have damaged an Fw 190.'

The group lost no aircraft and bombed successfully, but the Eighth had suffered its heaviest casualties so far. The 91st BG lost six B-17s and the 306th an astounding ten for a total loss rate above ten per cent. Bremen would continue to be a very well-defended and extremely tough target throughout the war.

There were other harbingers both of a stepped-up war effort and of the USAAF's public relations campaign at Molesworth. Capt Clark Gable visited the 303rd at the head of a team of six Hollywood personalities with the new 351st BG at Polebrook. Gable was doing advance work for a support-the-war film about the 351st entitled *Combat America*. This film work would later take the star on a combat mission with Capt Calhoun in *THE 8 BALL Mk II*. The rest of April passed with no flying due to heavy, continuous rain, but there was one administrative detail of interest – on the 20th the RAF formally transferred Molesworth to the USAAF in yet another sign of the Eighth's growing presence in the UK.

May 1943 brought a significant turn in the group's fortunes. On the 1st, there was a return to 'flak city', the hated target of St Nazaire. Two 351st BG officers flew with 303rd crews for orientation, and it must have been a sobering experience for them. There was only one abort in 19



B-17F 41-24610 GN-T JOE BTFSPK II of the 427th BS was lost on 1 May 1943. Its original crewmembers are, back row, from left to right, 1Lt Donald Stockton (pilot), 2Lt Fort Lipe (co-pilot), 2Lt Lawrence Grant (navigator) and 2Lt Lloyd Shirley (bombardier). Note "Dottie and Lerry" and "STOCK" personal markings near the navigator's and pilot's stations. Of interest is the 'Bugs Bunny' 427th BS emblem on the nose, which was usually associated with *S-for-Sugar*. Standing in the back row, far right, is 1Lt Quentin Hargrove, who survived the aerial break-up of a B-17E over New Mexico on 23 June 1942

aircraft, but the 427th BS lost two to heavy fighter opposition. They were *Black Swan* (six of whose crew were killed, three became PoWs and one evaded capture) and *JOE BTFSPK II* (seven killed, three captured), a group original, although not flown by its original crew. Their sacrifice was in vain, for the bombing was poor – only ten aircraft attacked due to cloud and a very short bomb run. Five B-17s actually brought their bombs home. The aircraft also brought back two dead airmen, one killed by flak, the other from fighter gunfire.

The mission on 4 May, ironically against General Motors and Ford facilities at Antwerp, was far more successful. Strike photos confirmed that 15 of 21 B-17s dispatched by the group which reached the target did tremendous damage. The other attacking groups did well too. Moreover, good fighter cover was provided by Spitfires and, for the first time in the 303rd's experience, by USAAF P-47s. However, as with anything new there were problems. The gunners had not been briefed to expect fighter escort all the way to the target and back, and some fired at the 'little friends', but fortunately without fatal result. The mission doubtless made a positive impression on two special passengers flying with Capt Calhoun in *THE 8 BALL Mk II*. One was the new 351st BG CO, Lt Col William Hatcher, and the other was Clark Gable, who manned the radio-room gun. Although the aircraft received some damage, it returned safely, along with all other group B-17s.

On 13 May, the 303rd achieved operational perfection in all areas, albeit under ideal conditions. Ground crews got 21 aircraft ready for the raid and there were no aborts. The group received outstanding fighter cover from a combination of Spitfires and P-47s and there was no damage from enemy fighters or the light flak that was encountered. The target, the Potez aircraft factory at Meaulte, was virtually annihilated on the bomb run. All group B-17s returned to Molesworth without a single personnel casualty. Maj Glenn Hagenbuch, who led the mission, was awarded the Silver Star for his performance. The 303rd had certainly come a long way from the simulated missions and failed operational readiness inspections

Capt William Calhoun and Clark Gable after the 5 May 1943 Antwerp mission



that had been such an embarrassment at Gowen Field in April 1942. The group could now fairly claim to have mastered the art of daylight precision bombing.

By coincidence, the day also marked the end of the Eighth's 'pioneer' phase. The 351st BG flew its first mission as part of the 1st BW, and a new 4th BW was created out of the 94th, 95th and 96th BGs, which also flew their first missions on this day. But the Eighth would need all the expertise it could muster from groups like the 303rd as Eaker pursued the next phase of the bombing campaign – a sustained assault against strategic targets deep in Germany, and beyond the range of fighter escorts. Eaker awaited only a period of sustained good weather over the Continent to begin.

The remainder of May provided an opportunity for the new groups to be 'blooded' in a series of missions against both the French submarine pen cities and U-boat yards along the north German coast. This also gave the 303rd the opportunity, in the face of competition from the other 'pioneer' groups, to achieve another milestone in the air war. It passed virtually un-noticed by the press, although it was always important to the bomber crews, and already a subject of deep concern to the American public. It would acquire even greater significance on the home front as casualties mounted during the coming air offensives. The milestone was, of course, completion by a bomber crew of the 25 missions that would enable crewmen to rotate back to the USA for less dangerous duties. The American public, not to mention the airmen themselves, needed reassurance that a heavy bomber crew had a real chance of completing a 25-mission tour, and that their sacrifices were justified.

Capt Irl Baldwin and the crew of *HELL'S ANGELS* were the first to prove it could be done, but not before the 303rd suffered some additional, and particularly demoralising, losses. USAAF brass were acutely in need of a neatly-packaged 'war story', complete with 'the girl back home' waiting for her man to return, so the crew of the 91st BG's *Memphis Belle* would be recognised as 'the first combat crew to complete their required combat missions *and return to the United States*' (emphasis added). William Wyler's matchless documentary film certainly played a role in their decision.

These circumstances should not detract from the Baldwin crew's accomplishment, completed on a challenging raid to Kiel on 14 May 1943. Significantly, *HELL'S ANGELS* was the lead ship of the 303rd formation, one of 19 group aircraft flying the mission in the main formation. Another six formed a squadron in the 92nd BG formation, that unit having graduated from training to combat duties. Through clear skies, and in the face of about 100 to 150 single- and twin-engined fighters, the main 303rd group flew in perfect formation up to the initial point. Baldwin's bombardier, 1Lt Donald Bone, then took over at the bombsight and aimed the whole formation's 61 tons of 500-lb bombs. They landed squarely on target, the Germania Werft AG U-boat yard and submarine pens. Bone commented afterwards:

'Our bombs absolutely split the target. It looked awfully good to me. I also shot down a German fighter. I knocked the cannon right out of his wing and then he went down.'

Baldwin said:

'Sorry I have to quit. It was a swell trip. Rough, but worth it. There were more fighters than I have ever seen before. The general consensus of my crew is that we won't have to go back there again.'

Bone's kill was one of 13 enemy aircraft confirmed as destroyed, four probables, and 12 damaged by the 303rd. But they were not the only aircraft to go down during the group's running fight with the enemy from the time the B-17s first penetrated German airspace to the moment they left the coast. Last seen spinning into the sea was *F.D.R.'s POTATO PEELER KIDS* with Capt Ross Bales' original 359th BS crew and its new bombardier, Lt Mark Mathis. Although six parachutes were observed, all aboard were killed. Capt Calhoun had been 359th CO when Medal of Honor recipient Jack Mathis died over Vegesack on 18 March. Then, he had written the family a letter-of-condolence, and now he had another to send. For Calhoun this was the saddest moment of the war.

Another original pilot killed was Capt Donald Stockton, whose crew had christened *JOE BITSPLEK II*. He was first pilot of *S-for-Sugar* when 20 mm shells struck his right side. He slumped dead over the controls, putting the aircraft into a steep dive. His co-pilot, Lt John Barker, and engineer, 1/Sgt Roy Smith, recovered with great difficulty. When Sgt Peter Zimba learned of this he noted:

'We lost Capt Stockton, a very good pilot. I got his clothing in the supply room from the hospital. There sure was a big hole through the jacket.'

It was Stockton's 24th mission. Zimba also recorded that, 'A co-pilot on '520 (B-17F 42-20520, *SAD SACK* of the 427th BS) had his arm blown off at the shoulder – he died from loss of blood and exposure'. The dead man was Lt Robert Woodley. He had been hit in the right shoulder by a 20 mm cannon shell. There was nothing that the pilot, Lt Fort Lipe, could do to help him.

Four other men in the group were wounded but survived, although it was an especially close-run thing for Lt Charles Box, the bombardier on *WALLAROO*. He took a bullet in his left ear that exited through his right cheek and was near death when the co-pilot, 2Lt Harold Gunn, got him to the radio-room, stabilised him with morphine and kept him alive until the aircraft returned to England. Box made a full recovery.

This mission was also significant for the 303rd because of the role played by Maj Lyle. He had been ordered by Brig Gen Fred Anderson, the new commander of VIII Bomber Command, to fly as first pilot for Col William Hatcher, CO of the 351st. Lyle was to indoctrinate Hatcher on combat procedures during an attack on a Luftwaffe airfield in Belgium. Lyle received a commendation from both Anderson and Hatcher for the help he provided.

This kind of combat indoctrination, using 'instructor pilots', was a practice which the 303rd was instituting within its own ranks. It now had enough seasoned pilots to guide replacement crews through the difficult first few missions, where quick learning was critical to survival. And the replacements, arriving in increasing numbers, were more competent due to better training – the result of the hard-won knowledge gained by the 303rd and the other pioneer groups during the days when they were mastering the art of daylight bombing. How the 303rd applied its expertise through the even more difficult days to come is the subject of subsequent chapters in this volume.

KEEP 'EM FLYING

Many unit histories tend to gloss over the work of the non-flying personnel with a few words of faint praise, despite their critical contribution to overall mission effectiveness. Yet a pre-occupation with combat accounts comes at the price of an incomplete understanding of what it took for a combat unit to succeed, especially in mid-20th century mechanised warfare.

Lewis Lyle, though, spoke up for his ground-based comrades in the 303rd BG throughout the war when he paid them this warm tribute:

'The ground echelon of our group never let us down during the three-and-a-half years of our wartime existence. The support we had at every level, from the cooks, drivers, guards, clerks, administrators and our chaplains, plus the intelligence, armament, bomb loading and supply personnel, was outstanding. And who could ever forget the magnificent support we received from the depot group and the line maintenance people?'

These words reflect the early days when the group's continued existence was in question in the USA and the ground echelon was literally the only element holding it together, as the most experienced flight crews were transferred to support the earlier deployments to the European theatre of the 97th and 306th BGs. They cover the early 'pioneer' period.

HELL'S ANGELS is seen undergoing a full four-engine change. Note that the No 3 (starboard inner) engine has been removed, work is being done on the No 1 propeller and the No 2 engine has been attached to a portable winch for eventual removal. The Wright and Studebaker licence-built R-1820-65 and R-1820-97 nine-cylinder radial engines powering B-17Fs and B-17Gs were efficient weight-to-horsepower powerplants which could absorb substantial damage. They were also short-lived, and thus required frequent replacement (*Brian McGuire*)



when the 303rd was plagued by heavy losses and battle damage, coupled with a lack of replacement personnel and materiel, so that the group had to struggle mightily to get even small numbers of B-17s in the air. And they refer to the 303rd's solid successes when the full power of America's war machine was harnessed during the mid and late-war period. Of this time those who were there, as Lyle was, will tell you, 'A look at the aircraft available for dispatch into combat and the number of aeroplanes actually dispatched shows the 303rd BCG as the highest of any B-17 outfit in the Eighth Air Force.'

The best way to understand the contribution of the group's ground echelon was to see it in action. As with all US Army units in World War 2, it comprised group headquarters, with four S-designated sections: S-1, personnel; S-2, intelligence; S-3, operations; and S-4, supply and maintenance. In January 1944 there were 79 officers and enlisted personnel attached to 303rd BCG HQ, but they represented the tip of the iceberg. In addition to squadron-level functions, such as armament, ordnance, communications and technical supply, numerous special duties squadrons existed to take care of the unit's personnel and materiel needs.

Working with parallel organisations in each squadron, S-1 handled group personnel matters. Group S-2 functions were well described by the late Carlton M Smith, who was a lieutenant serving as group photo interpreter (PI) on the S-2 staff:

'A typical S-2 staff of an Eighth Air Force bomb group consisted of the group intelligence officer, the group photo interpreter, a senior NCOIC, an NCO for the map room and the escape and evasion material, as well as one or two additional NCOs. Supplementing this small crew were the intelligence officers and staff from the four combat squadrons who had desks in the group office. Each squadron usually had two officers and four NCOs, so there were adequate numbers to operate on a 24-hour basis. At first glance it might appear as if the organisational structure was contrary to effective management, with the personnel answering to both the S-2 officer and their squadron commander, but in practice this was no hindrance to effective operation in the 303rd BCG. Dedication to a common mission outweighed parochial ties. Duties were assigned and performed by mission functions rather than by squadron designation.

To walk through a typical mission, it would start with the receipt of the field order from operations. The briefing officers would prepare their notes, maps, photos and other material, while the NCOs would post the routes on the maps, prepare the mission kits for the bombardiers and navigators, make up the escape and evasion kits and be ready to assist in the briefings. Usually, there was a separate briefing for pilots, bombardiers, navigators and gunners. All would be advised of the importance

The teletype room in the 303rd S-3 operations area. It was here that mission warning orders and other vital communications were received at Molesworth from wing and higher Eighth Air Force echelons, and also where the group transmitted mission-related reports back up the chain of command (Mel Schulstad)



Where the missions came together – the main S-3 operations room in the 303rd BG headquarters, shown here with S-3 personnel on 27 February 1945. This is where detailed mission planning took place throughout the 303rd's wartime stay at Molesworth (Mel Schulstad)

of the target, flak and enemy fighter threats and recommended escape and evasion procedures. In addition, the S-2 briefing for bombardiers would include detailed target identification information and bomb run landmarks beginning at the initial point.

When the aircraft returned from the mission, the S-2 personnel became interrogators. It was then their job to obtain as much information as possible from tired crews who were often more anxious to hit the sack than talk about the mission. It required tact and understanding when prodding for the details which went into the reports that were required by higher headquarters in just a few hours' time. There was always a mission summary report, which had to be compiled, and very important for future operations was the flak report. The reports concerning crew comments and fighter claims were no less important.

As soon as the strike photos were received from the photo laboratory the PI plotted the bomb patterns of each squadron, determining their centres and comparing them to the assigned mean point of impact. From this, a degree of bombing accuracy – range and deflection – could be recorded. The last phase of the report was a damage assessment. The report was sent immediately to the group commander, but it was also of much interest to the bombardiers, and many made post-mission stops at the PI desk to review the photos. As the PI, I became close to many of the bombardiers because of this common interest, and it was a natural for me to do the bombardier briefings and target identification classes.

The dedication of the 303rd's S-2 staff is underlined by the fact that a number of them flew on combat missions so that they could better understand the way their efforts assisted the aircrews. Carlton Smith flew five such missions.

The group S-3 section was responsible for detailed mission planning. Working with the operations sections of the individual squadrons, they



would 'put the mission together', allocating squadron aircraft and crews to the effort. Usually, three out of four squadrons would fly a mission unless it was a 'maximum effort', which meant that everything would fly. The S-3 section would work from the field order, analysing it and deciding just how the group would accomplish its part of the operation within established procedures and guidelines. Lead crews selected for the mission would be brought into the planning process as early as possible, rising well before the regular aircrews. It was not uncommon for individual operations officers who were rated as pilots to put themselves down as group or squadron leaders. Mel Schulstad, for example, flew many missions as an operations officer during the later stages of the war.

Most visible in its functioning was group S-4, supply and maintenance. Its role was a supervisory one, closely related to that of the four squadron S-4 organisations – ensuring that there were enough B-17s available in operational condition to fill the mission rosters. S-4 responsibility included not just supply and maintenance, but also engineering and armament. This was a task of extraordinary difficulty, given the technical complexity, for that time, of the B-17's different systems. Listing just a few areas – engines, propellers, superchargers, radio equipment, radar navigation and bombing equipment such as GEE and H2X, oxygen systems, instruments, electrical systems, hydraulics, bombsights and AFCE equipment, not to mention the separate areas of armament and ordnance – gives some sense of the task's magnitude. All systems had to operate perfectly for the mission to succeed and to give the aircrews a fighting chance to return.

Group S-4 was assisted in this challenge by a large ground staff, and this organisation was comprised not only of the flying squadron S-4 staffs and individual aircraft groundcrews, but by a host of ancillary support squadrons resident at Molesworth, many of whose responsibilities were blurred. As Quentin Hargrove, who ended the war as group S-4, recalls:



303rd BG armourers perform the physically-demanding, and dangerous, job of loading a B-17's bomb-bay before a mission



If the damage was confined to 427th BS B-17F 42-5392 *STRIC-NINE*'s skin it would be repaired by the groundcrew, but if more extensive, by the 444th Sub Depot. The aircraft was lost to fighters on the 11 August 1943 Gilze-Rijen mission with Lt Lauren Quillen's crew who were flying their first mission (Lorraine Shelhamer)

This view reveals the damage inflicted on *STRIC-NINE*'s tail by an exploding 20 mm cannon shell

"There was an overlap of functions, but nobody really cared about that. You just got on with what you needed to do. Everybody pitched in and it all got accomplished somehow."

At the flying squadron level, the technical supply section, to which Sgt Zimba belonged in the 427th BS, were supply 'jacks-of-all-trades', responsible for ensuring squadron personnel had everything from personal flight equipment, such as oxygen masks, Mae-Weests, and electrically-heated 'blue-bunny' suits, to aircraft spares. The armament section maintained all the 0.50-cal guns and their sights, both for turrets and hand-held flexible ones. They were also in charge of loading the ammunition and bombs before each mission. The ordnance section was responsible for fusing the bombs before a mission, and otherwise ensuring that their squadron had the ordnance it needed. The 863rd Chemical Company handled all incendiary bombs and similar munitions for the group.

In these functions the flying squadrons were aided in 1943 by the 1681st Ordnance Supply and Maintenance Company, which was responsible for



The nickname *STRIC-NINE* was a play on words based on the number '9' in the bomber's serial and its pilot's name, Strickland. This 427th BS lead crew completed their 25 missions. They are, back row, from left to right, Capt Alexander Strickland Jr (pilot), 2Lt Curtis Olsen (co-pilot), 1Lt Carl Hokans (navigator) and 1Lt Edwin Lamme (bombardier), and front row, from left to right, S/Sgt Ralph Strohsack (engineer), T/Sgt Albert Martel Jr (radio operator), S/Sgt John McGill (waist gunner), S/Sgt Raymond Peck (ball turret gunner), S/Sgt James Baart (waist gunner) and S/Sgt Anthony Sherg (tail gunner)





the dual task of bomb and ammunition supply to the squadrons, as well as the maintenance of all base vehicles. The 1681st likewise maintained aircraft machine guns, was responsible for the cleaning and oiling of guns and passed out flak-suits to combat crewmen. It also repaired the bicycles of base personnel and made many other repairs to base facilities and personal items of others at the base.

The group's supply office was responsible for procuring everything needed to allow the air echelon to function. But there was nothing more important than supplying the critical spare parts necessary to get an aircraft back in the air, so that it no longer had AOG – aircraft-on-ground, not-in-stock – status. Special tracking and supply procedures were in force to ensure the AOG list was kept as short as possible.

The squadron groundcrews were responsible for normal maintenance and repairing 'routine' damage such as bullet or cannon shell holes in the aircraft's skin. More serious repairs and overhauls were handled by the 444th Sub Depot and its extensive specialty shops, such as the structures, electrical and supercharger shops, to name just a few. Repairs to entire airframes, both new and old, were carried out in the large J-1 hanger.

The ground echelon was also responsible for preventing aircraft being damaged by an ever-present threat – fire. Because Molesworth was initially under British administrative control, firefighting duties were performed by

City of ALBUQUERQUE or STRIC-NINE? The City of Albuquerque was actually STRIC-NINE! Photographic analysis establishes that the white lettering on the starboard nose of this aircraft was applied after this photograph was taken. Why Albuquerque? The photo advertises the 427th BS ground echelon's heritage with the 38th RS insignia disc in the front row. The 38th RS was stationed at Albuquerque from 5 May to 22 November 1941. The dog is 'Recon', the 427th BS's mascot which travelled from Alamogordo in 1942 and remained with the group at Molesworth through to 1945



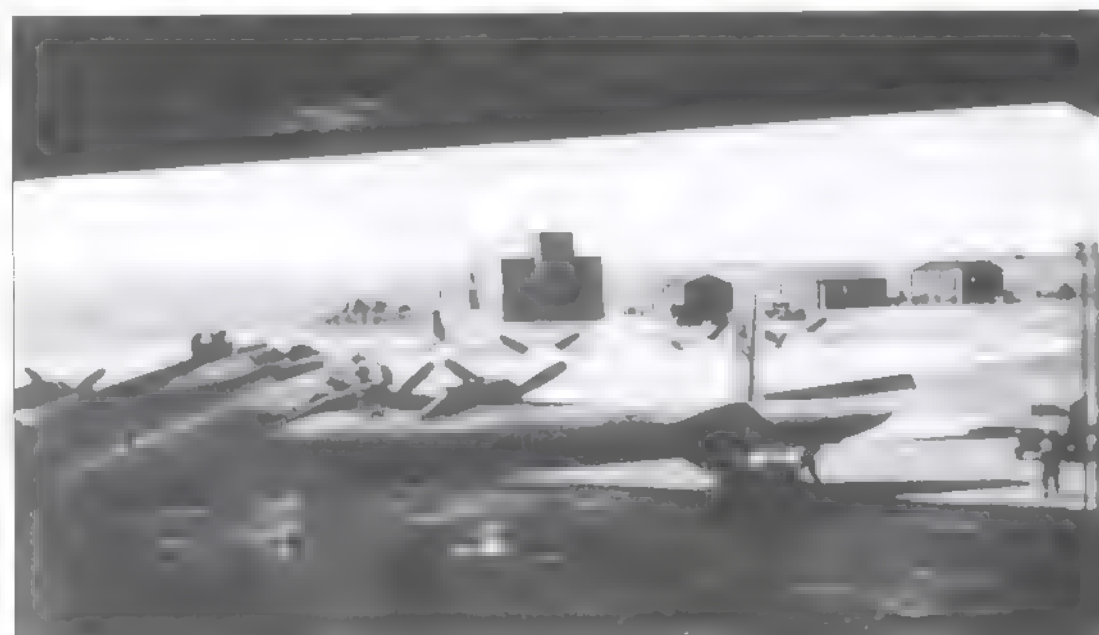
'How in the hell are we going to fix this one?' is what these disgruntled-looking members of the group's ground echelon appear to be thinking as they stand before the badly damaged trailing edge of an aluminium-finished B-17G. Note Station 107's J-1 hanger in the background. Clearly, this is a major repair, which will involve the 444th Sub-Depot's structures shop



The 444th Sub-Depot scoreboard in early 1945. Each silhouette represents one battle-damaged aircraft repaired, with a total of 1093. The sign on the wall to the left of the silhouettes reads *444th Sub-Depot - Class-1 - formerly 328th Service Squadron - aircraft repaired since November 22 1942*



The 444th Sub-Depot structures shop



Two natural aluminium finished 303rd B-17Gs undergo maintenance in and around the main J-1 Hanger at Molesworth. In the background is the Station 107 control tower



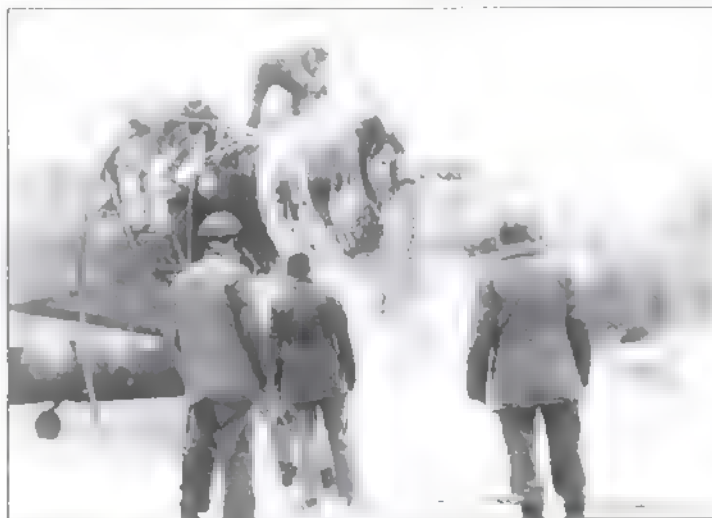
Groundcrew pose with *SKY WOLF* following maintenance in the J-1 hangar. Of great interest is the national insignia with bars and a newly-applied insignia-blue surround replacing the insignia-red surround ordered removed after 14 August 1943. Not all 303rd aircraft showed such compliance with the regulations. Note how the winged wolf's foot and bow-with-bomb have been repainted over the insignia-blue surround and white bar

Men of the 2097th Engineers Fire Fighting Platoon save veteran B-17G 42-38050 BN-U *THUNDER BIRD* of the 359th BS from an engine fire on 15 February 1945

the resident RAF fire equipment school. Later, the American 2097th Engineers Fire Fighting Platoon was responsible for all base fire-fighting activities. The firemen extinguished fires on burning B-17s, haystacks in fields near Molesworth, dispersal tents, Nissen huts and other base facilities. Several B-17s were saved when the 2097th quickly extinguished aircraft fires and prevented potentially disastrous explosions. Sometimes, of course, a B-17 could neither be saved nor repaired, in which case it was salvaged and the carcass consigned to the 'bone yard'.

The other part of the ground echelon's mission was to look after that most vital element – the men. The mission of the huge 3rd Station Complement, which comprised 185 men in 1944, was to make Molesworth a comfortable place to live, and to improve base working facilities. To this end, the utilities section employed carpenters, electricians, engineers, painters and handymen. They maintained existing facilities, constructed new buildings, remodelled old ones, built roads, repaired runways and kept water and electricity flowing throughout the base. The unit operated barber shops, tailor shops, the gymnasium and many other facilities that made life more bearable for the troops.

The 3rd Station Complement had a separate control tower section, which was responsible for the radio equipment used for communicating with group aircraft and for the maintenance of the flare path, caravan, beacon and searchlights. There was also a communications section which



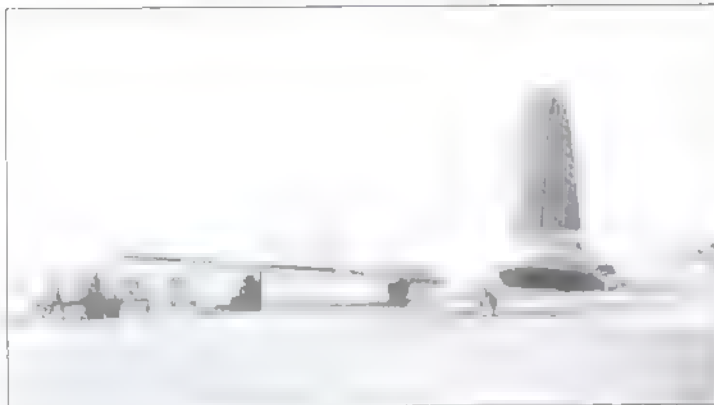
The 303rd BG's 'bone yard'. The B-17 carcass cannot be matched with the known serial numbers, or fates of any 360th BS aircraft with the fuselage code PU-A, so this derelict remains unidentified



The 303rd BG's utility aircraft fleet included these P-47Ds painted in full group markings and national insignia. The last aircraft is a Beech UC-64 Bobcat. The fuselage letter on the closest P-47 is 'R'

The 303rd operated a number of utility B-17s, with group HQ flying B-17E 41-9020 *Phyllis*, also known as *Tugboat Annie*, which was inherited from the 97th BG. The veteran was painted with broad black and white stripes on its fuselage and tail. Used as a target tug, the bomber carried the call letter 'N' on its tail

Group HQ also operated B-17F 42-29947 *Wabash Cannonball*, also known as *The Headquarters Hack*, acquired from the 91st BG on 27 July 1943. The bomber also served as a formation assembly ship. *Wabash Cannonball* is parked near later aluminium-finished B-17Gs, the nearest of which is 42-97187 PU-1 *Miss Umbriago* of the 360th BS, lost over Magdeburg on 28 September 1944. *Wabash Cannonball* carried the call letter 'L' in 303rd service without squadron letters



installed and maintained the telephone and teletype systems essential for the base operations.

The 1114th Quartermaster Company obtained fuel for both base vehicles and aircraft, which included not just the group's B-17s, but also two P-47s and a number of utility machines. The quartermasters dealt with rationing boards to get more coal for the barracks, and were responsible for laundry and shoe repair services. They also had the important job of providing clothing and food for base personnel. Other units providing support services were the 1199th Military Police Company, the 3rd Provisional Gas Detachment, the 18th Weather Squadron, Detachment 107, the 202nd Finance Section and the Eighth Air Force Dental Detachment (At Large).





The main bar at the Molesworth Officers' Club. The couple third and fourth from the left in the front row are Lt Mary Shore, a nurse assigned to the 303rd Station Hospital, and Capt William Eisenhart, 359th BS lead crew pilot. They met at Molesworth and were married in England during the war (Mel Schulstad)



A 360th BS officers' party with local ladies in attendance, doubtless from the station hospital and surrounding villages, on 7 April 1945

Bath time for 'Homer' - two 358th BS members wash the squadron mascot. Homer was reportedly awarded the Air Medal for participating in five missions over enemy territory with 2Lt Lawrence Poole's crew during January and February 1945 (Brian McGuire)



Primary medical care was provided by the flight surgeons and corpsmen of the 249th Medical Dispensary, who were the first on scene to care for the wounded when the bombers returned. Its commander, Maj Abraham Black, was especially respected for the compassion he brought to his work. The dispensary was supported by the 303rd Station Hospital, a 750-bed facility near Thrapston, which also cared for the sick, injured and wounded of the nearby 351st BGI at Polebrook and the 384th BGI at Grafon Underwood. The hospital's capacity was doubled after D-Day to take care of men wounded in the ground fighting.

Group officers' and enlisted men's mess facilities and clubs were located in communal sites near squadron areas, with each contributing mess personnel. The main officers' club had an attractive bar, as did that of the enlisted ranks. There were also times for lighter moments at the base.



Paying their last respects – 303rd BG personnel at the graves of five comrades at a wartime cemetery in England

whether in the form of parties, games or other activities only distantly related to military affairs.

But the reality of death was ever-present, especially when a B-17 brought back crewmen killed in action. Then it was the duty of one of the group's two chaplains, Fr Edmund Skoner and Rev Merritt O 'Chappie' Slawson, to accompany a detail of the deceased's friends on a burial party. The dead would be laid to rest at a site south of London. Many were transferred after the war to the Cambridge American War Cemetery.



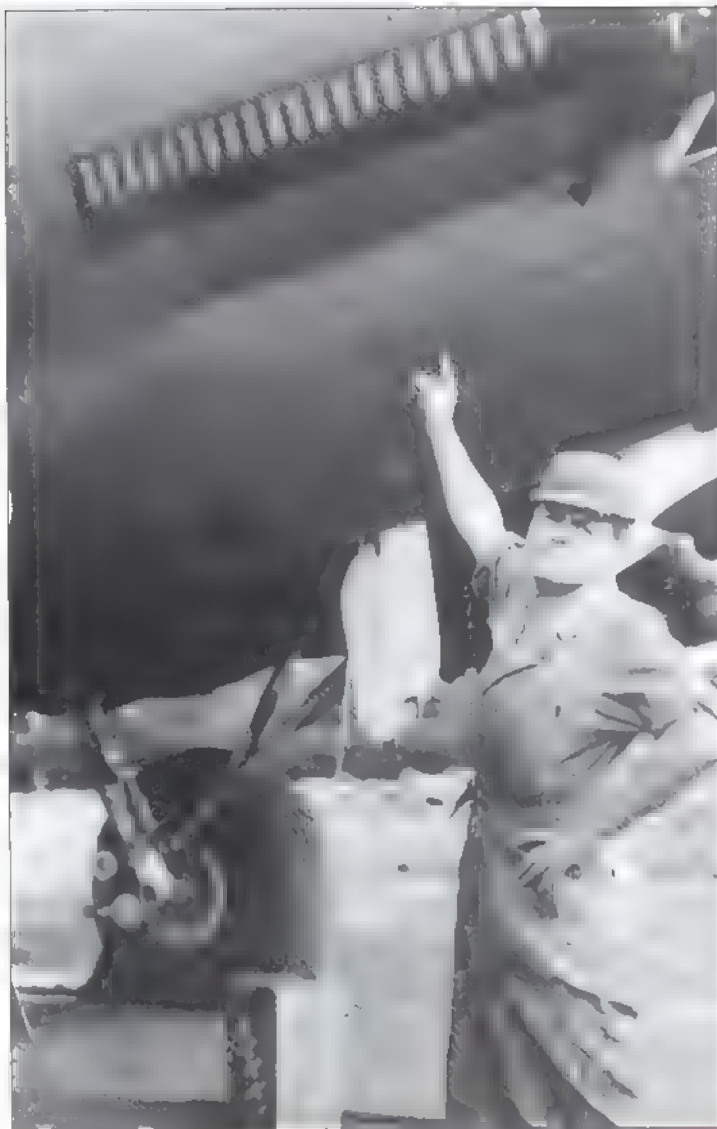
Reverend Merritt O 'Chappie' Slawson, also known as 'the old chap' at 33 years of age. Note the Chaplains' Corps insignia on his left collar (Jack Slawson)



Waiting for the bombers to return, 303rd ground personnel crane their necks skyward to catch sight of the group's aircraft

'Raising Sweat' was the caption on this photo as an armorer readies the radio-room gun of a 427th B-17, believed to be *VICIOUS VIRGIN* (Lorraine Shelhamer)





A 358th BS groundcrew chief points to bomb symbols on his B-17, signifying the completion of 20 missions. Note flak patch above the pitot tube (Brian McGuire)

The groundcrew of B-17G 42-32027 GN-E *Betty Jane* of the 427th BS hams it up as groundcrew chief S/Sgt Oldrich Fojt adds another mission bomb to the aircraft's already-impressive tally. Between 1 March 1944, when it joined the group, and 13 September 1944 when the bomber was lost, *Betty Jane* logged 86 missions, making it one of the 303rd's high-mission B-17Gs



S/Sgt Oldrich Fojt fires up the portable petrol engine used to provide electrical power to *Betty Jane*'s R-1820 inertial starters, which will in turn start the B-17's engines

Both chaplains' devotion to their flocks long outlasted wartime service. Fr Skoner was always there to say Mass and offer counsel, while 'Chappie' Slawson was inventive in devising ways of helping the men endure the trials of combat. Perhaps the best story told about Slawson involves his practice of scratching crewmen's names on pennies and handing them out with the admonition that they return the coins to him. According to one account, the sole-survivor of a ditched B-17 held onto his penny, and with it the will to survive, because the Chaplain had told him that morning, 'bring this penny back to me. I'll be praying for you'. The man didn't want to disappoint 'the old chap'.

Day-in, day-out, the bomber crews' return was the one event that gripped the ground echelon when the time drew near. All eyes would be watching the sky in the hope that the full complement of B-17s dispatched that morning would come home. After their return, there was little time for reflection, especially if another raid was scheduled for the next day. The



Betty Jane leaves its hardstand to take its place in the line of 303rd B-17s forming on the perimeter track for another mission. Note ground support equipment scattered about in the haste to get everything ready. This is pre-August 1944, when the group adopted new high-visibility group-identifier markings that included a broad red border around the 'triangle-C' markings on the upper right wing and tail



Betty Jane in formation, centre, with new high-visibility group markings. Note that the new red-bordered triangle-C on the right wing was not painted over the old triangle-C. Instead, contrary to regulations, it was painted directly to the left of it, leaving the aircraft with possibly unique twin-triangles on the right wing (*William Cox*)

groundcrews would work around-the-clock to get their B-17s repaired and ready for the next effort. Perhaps a crew chief or an entire groundcrew would pause briefly to point with pride to their B-17's mission tally for a photographer. But soon the crew chief would start the portable 'putt-putt' power-unit needed to bring the B-17's four R-1820 engines to life and choreograph the engine-start sequence with the pilots. Then the whole groundcrew would stand amid the ordered chaos of their support equipment to wish their Fortress and her crew luck as they taxied off on another raid against the Third Reich.



WEATHERING THE CRISIS

In August 1943 Lt William D McSweeney Jr of the 358th BS confided to his notebook, 'Focke-Wulfs attacked outside the Ruhr defences and hit the high and lead groups. They didn't bother us thanks to good formation flying'.

This comment from the navigator on Lt Donald Gamble's crew reflects much of the 303rd's experience during the 'crisis period' of daylight bombing between mid-1943 and early-1944. This time is best understood as being that when Eighth Air Force leadership sought to destroy vital industrial targets in Germany without the benefit of continuous fighter escort for the bombers. They proved the concept that 'the bomber will always get through', but not without losses so prohibitive that they risked losing support for the entire campaign.

Fortunately, the crisis ended after the Eighth (with a little help from the RAF) discovered that combining the North American P-51 airframe with the Rolls-Royce Merlin engine, which powered the Spitfire, provided the long-range escort needed to shoot the Luftwaffe out of the skies over its own homeland, while also increasing the number of targets it had to defend. These included aircraft factories throughout *Grossdeutschland* and Berlin itself. When the Eighth launched its first major attack against the city on 6 March 1944 the Luftwaffe's fate was all but sealed. In 1944-45 Germany would be buried under an avalanche of bombs which annihilated its industrial and transportation infrastructure.

The crisis developed slowly but inexorably as the Eighth's bomber strength began rising from May 1943. Indicative of this growth was the establishment on 18 May of the 103rd PBCB, supplementing the 101st and 102nd PBCW formations of 1st BW which had been created the previous January. The 303rd was the first group assigned to the 103rd PBCB, and it was joined by the 379th BCG on 29 May 1943 and the 384th BCG on 22 June. The 303rd flew most of its remaining missions as part of the 103rd both before and after it had become the 41st Combat Bombardment Wing of the 1st Bombardment Division following the first Schweinfurt raid on 17 August 1943.

The group flew three more missions in May, losing another original aircraft, the 360th BS's 41-24602 *Yardbird* (one of whose crew was killed with nine becoming PoWs) to fighters and flak against the hated St Nazaire on 29 May. The skies remained quiet during the first three weeks of June, except for a raid on the 11th when the group attacked Wilhelmshaven, enduring withering flak and relentless fighter attacks for 45 minutes. Only *Good Snuff* of the 359th BS was lost (with four killed and six captured), but even Lt George Stallings' veteran crew in *THUMPERAGAIN* was awed by the ferocity of the opposition. 'We have never experienced such persistent attacks', Stallings said. 'They weren't

cadets', added his top-turret gunner, T/Sgt James Watson. Clearly, the Luftwaffe was preparing for a long, tough fight, although the group was equally surprised when, two days later, it attacked Bremen and no more than four to six fighters were observed. The 303rd returned without loss.

On 16 June the 303rd passed a technical inspection attended by US Ambassador John C. Winant, receiving special praise for the ground echelon's work. On the 20th Lewis Lyle was promoted to deputy group CO, replacing Lt Col Robinson, who became CO of the 306th BGI. The group's ranks were filling with solid replacement crews from America, who were also receiving good training on arrival in the European theatre. Typical were the crews of Lt John Lemmon and Lt Don Gamble, assigned to the 358th BS, and Lt David Shelhamer's of the 427th BS. Americans who had previously served with the Royal Canadian Air Force, such as Lt Edward 'Woody' Woddrop, a former sergeant pilot on Wellingtons, further strengthened the group.

David Shelhamer spoke for most replacement crews when he wrote after the 11 June mission, 'Frankly, from all indications as far as loss of personnel, I think I'm in the best group and best squadron in the whole damned European theatre - we will see about this, though!' Events would vindicate his opinion, but it was still difficult, even in the 303rd, for a crew to complete a 25-mission tour. Joining the 427th that same day was Lt Adele Coré's crew, but they failed to return from their 24th mission on 26 November 1943.

From a unit-mission perspective, however, the 303rd's performance during the crisis was stellar. While others were being decimated repeatedly, and some even lost unit integrity, it persevered through this dismal time. Provided visibility was clear, the group usually bombed with good results. With a few notable exceptions, it seldom lost more than one or two B-17s per mission. All in all, the 303rd compiled a record of accomplishment which was the envy of any bomb group in the Eighth.

The group's solid track record and morale attracted leadership attention for another reason - its success provided 'good copy', and well represented the Eighth when VIPs wanted a look at the strategic bombing campaign. Both were vital elements in the battle for public and political support of

Lt George Stallings's highly competent crew with *THUMPER AGAIN*. They are, back row, from left to right, 1Lt J Ford Kelley (navigator), 1Lt Stallings Jr (pilot), 1Lt Joseph Bradbury (co-pilot), 2Lt Frank Kulesa (bombardier), and front row, from left to right, S/Sgt Meyer 'Mike' Levin (radio operator), T/Sgt Arthur Stevens (ball turret gunner), Sgt Walter Pallage, S/Sgt John J Stickler (waist gunner), Sgt Lawrence Pierson (tail gunner), S/Sgt Robert Yattaw (waist gunner) and T/Sgt James Watson (engineer)



YB-40 42-5736 BN-Q *Tampa Tornado* (in the background) of the 359th BS was photographed by David Shelhamer during its brief 303rd service from 3 to 28 August 1943. The serial and aircraft numbers are visible in the original photo, as is the 'C' painted in the tail-triangle, despite it being partially obscured by the foreground propeller blade. Note the second top-turret above the radio-room (Lorraine Shelhamer)



daylight bombing – factors as important to the Eighth's leadership in 1943 as loss rates and bombs on target.

By the third week of June its strength comprised 13 B-17 groups and three P-47 units. Its three B-24 groups – the 44th, 93rd and 389th – were on extended assignment to North Africa for operations which included the famous Ploesti low-level mission of 1 August 1943. The B-24s would not return until September. With the forces available to him, Eaker was now ready to attack a new target in the Ruhr – a synthetic oil plant at Hils. On 22 June, the group dispatched 28 aircraft in two formations and bombed well, although *'THE HUNTING CLUB'* of the 358th BS fell to flak with six crew killed and four becoming PoWs. Out of 277 B-17s dispatched, 20 were lost, five from the 91st BG alone.

The mission was notable because five 92nd BG YB-40 gunships flew with the 303rd for the first time. These aircraft carried no bombs, but had 14 0.50-cal guns, including two in a chin-turret which became standard in the B-17G, two nose cheek-guns, a regular twin top-turret, a second twin-turret in the radio-room, a regular ball-turret, two twin power-driven waist guns in the staggered locations that also became standard in the B-17G and a power-driven pair of tail-guns that were a precursor to the Cheyenne turret on late-model B-17Gs. The YB-40s' excessive weight, though,

prevented them from keeping up with regular B-17s, especially after bomb release, and they were quickly phased-out of active service.

The next raid, on 23 June against Villacoublay, was a failure. The target was cloud-covered and the group was recalled. The 303rd became scattered in the overcast and its crews were fortunate to return without loss against the fighter opposition encountered. The group was not so lucky on a far more ambitious raid against the Hamburg U-boat yards on 25 June. The Eighth dispatched 275 B-17s, but the entire force was recalled due to cloud. The 303rd formation came apart again in heavy contrails and three 360th BS B-17s were lost. Flak accounted for *The Arenger*, with the loss of seven killed and four captured. German fighters accounted for *The "WITCHES III"*, killing one crewman and sending nine into captivity, while *Quinine the Bitter Dose* was damaged so badly that Lt George Stallings ordered his crew to bale out over England. He took the aircraft half a mile out to sea, baled out and swam to shore. One crew member was

killed and five others wounded. Stallings was awarded both US and British DFCs for his actions.

This first mission in which the 303rd, 379th and 384th BGs flew together was not a success. The 379th lost six aircraft and the 384th three. The Eighth lost a total of 18, so most of the missing aircraft belonged to the 103rd PBCW. No bombs fell on Hamburg. Between 26 June and 16 July the Eighth only flew missions against targets in France. It was during this period that Eighth Air Force bomb groups applied their geometric identification markings to vertical stabilisers and upper right wings. Henceforth, the 303rd was always associated with its 'triangle-C' insignia.

The group's only loss during this time came on 4 July during a raid on Le Mans when fighters shot down *The Mugger* of the 358th BS – two of its crew were killed and four captured, but another four escaped. Baker launched a mission against Hannover on the 17th, but weather again forced a recall. Stung by defeat at the hands of the elements, Baker awaited a forecast of sustained good weather before venturing to Germany again.

With 15 B-17 groups, his chance for a major offensive came on 24 July – the beginning of 'Blitz Week' – with a surprise attack against Norway, the Eighth's first. The 1st BW attacked magnesium, aluminium and nitrate works at Heroya when 167 B-17s out of the 180 dispatched bombed with excellent results. The 4th BW's mission against U-boat objectives at Trondheim was also successful, with 41 out of 46 aircraft dispatched hitting the target area. However, cloud cover prevented another 87 4th BW aircraft from attacking Bergen. Only two B-17s were lost, one crash-landing in Sweden.

On 25 July Baker sent 123 1st BW B-17s to attack U-boat factories and facilities in Hamburg. Intended to complement an RAF incendiary raid the previous evening, most groups found their targets obscured by smoke still pouring from the fires. The 303rd led the formation and bombed with good results, although losing *Hutch* of the 360th BS to fighters – nine of its crew went into captivity and two were killed. In return, seven German fighters were confirmed as destroyed, including one claimed by Lt Darrell Gust, navigator on Lt John Lemmon's crew. He reported:

'We were hit by swarms of fighters as soon as we crossed the coastline. These guys were EAGER! Maybe 20 to 30 miles from the target, I looked out of the window over my navigator's table and saw an Me 109 sitting out there out of range, but apparently flying the same course we were, and maybe 200 to 300 yards below our formation. I knew that fighter pilots sometimes did this, kind of looking us over. Then they would suddenly zoom up and ahead of us, positioning themselves for a 180-degree turn and a nose-first attack on the B-17 formations.

'I thought, "this bastard is up to no good and I'll keep my eye on him". He just kept flying parallel to us, but

Molesworth was a showcase Eighth Air Force bomber base in its leaders' battle to win influential support for daylight bombing. Here, top-scoring American World War 1 ace Eddie Rickenbacker talks to the troops inside the J-1 hanger on 26 July 1943. At right is Col Kermit Stevens, prospective 303rd CO, and to his right is the outgoing CO, Col Francis Marion



Lt John Lemmon's crew and B-17F 42-29664 *VK-C Jersey Bounce Jr* of the 358th BS. Lemmon and his navigator, Lt Darrell Gust, are standing at the extreme left, while tail gunner Sgt Virgil Brown is sitting in the front row, second from left. The aircraft ditched in the North Sea on 20 December 1943 with Lt John Henderson's crew during the mission in which S/Sgt Forrest K Vosler was awarded the Medal of Honor (Darrell Gust)

he seemed to be getting closer. He finally edged in to what I estimated to be about 700 to 800 yds. I grabbed the 0.50-cal above my navigator's desk and gave him about 15 to 20 rounds. I could immediately see my tracers going behind him. I corrected my aim and gave him a burst of about 30 rounds. Suddenly, there was a plume of white smoke emerging from the Me 109, and he started to drop in a vertical dive. I called to S/Sgt Virgil Brown, our tail gunner, that I had nailed an Me 109 and asked him to keep his eye on it. He said he saw it go straight down and crash behind us.'

No much for the supposed worthlessness of cheek guns. The fighters were far more effective against the low 384th BGI. It lost seven of the fifteen B-17s shot-down over Hamburg. Four more fell over Kiel on the 4th BW's mission there.

'Blitz Week' ground on with missions against Hannover and Hamburg on 26 July, and against aircraft factories at Kassel, Oschersleben, Kiel and Warnemünde on the 28th, followed by Kassel again on the 30th. The 303rd's only aircraft loss occurred on the second Kassel mission, when the 360th BS's *Upstairs Maid*, flown by Lt Robert Cogswell's crew, was damaged by flak and fighters approaching the target and lost its No 4 engine. Another failed on the way back, forcing Cogswell to ditch 22 miles off the English coast. He brought the aircraft in for a perfect landing, enabling all aboard to safely reach the dinghies. The crew was picked up by an RAF air-sea rescue launch about an hour later.

When the offensive ended, Baker's force had been cut from over 330 to less than 200 serviceable B-17s. The Eighth rested and received replacements over the next two weeks, and on 5 August the 303rd welcomed a



new CO when Col Kermit D Stevens replaced Lt Col Marion, who transferred to 1st BW headquarters. Aged 34, and considered to be an 'older, pre-war officer', Stevens was nonetheless a great inspiration to the youngsters in their teens and early twenties whom he commanded. His pep talks were legendary and his briefing exhortation, 'You've got to get in there and really bow your necks', was so well received that a later group B-17G was even named after it. Stevens flew many of the toughest missions, and his stewardship of the group lasted until 1 September 1944.

The offensive resumed on 12 August when the 360th BS lost *Of Ironsides* to fighters over Gelsenkirchen, with one crewman killed and nine captured. A total of 25 B-17s was lost on the mission. The group flew two more raids against airfields in France and Holland without loss. Then came 17 August and the famous 'double-strike'. The 4th BW attacked the Bf 109 factory at Regensburg using long-range Tokyo-tank equipped aircraft, while the 1st BW raided the ball-bearing factories clustered around Schweinfurt – the 'strategic jugular' according to the Eighth Air Force leadership. There has been much debate over decisions which resulted in the 4th BW losing 24 out of 147 aircraft on its mission to Regensburg, as well as about the 1st BW losing 36 of 231 B-17s in its long-delayed Schweinfurt attack. Even more has been written about the blood-letting in the ranks of each wing as one B-17 after another fell to relentless Luftwaffe attacks far beyond the range of US fighter escort.

The debate has largely obscured the 303rd's accomplishment, however. Col Stevens led the main group formation of 18 B-17s in *Gi-for-Gierge*, while Maj Lyle headed a composite group of 11 303rd aircraft in *Satur's Workshop*, with a six-ship 379th high squadron. Under their leadership, the 'Hell's Angels' fought their way to and from Schweinfurt against the same ferocious opposition faced by the other groups. Although the main formation's bomb-run was spoiled when the lead bombardier took a chunk of flak in the stomach seconds before bomb release, the 303rd returned to England without losing a single B-17. Four of that 379th high squadron were lost.

Was it luck? This was David Shelhamer's post-mission assessment:



The colonel and the princess. Col Kermit D Stevens, 303rd CO from 5 August 1943 to 1 September 1944, escorts the future Queen, Princess Elizabeth, during the Royal Family's visit to Motesworth on 6 July 1944



The nose art of B-17G 42-97260 PU-Q *BOW-UR-NECK-STEVEN'S* of the 360th BS, named after Col Stevens' famous briefing exhortation. It was lost to flak over Volkingen on 11 May 1944

Lt Arthur Pentz's crew with B-17F 42-29640 BN-X *Ol' Ironsides* of the 359th BS, which was lost over Gelsenkirchen on 12 August 1943. Not on the mission was 2Lt Norman Jacobsen (back row, left) who later flew as lead navigator with Brig Gen Travis and Lt Col Calhoun on the 11 January 1944 Oschersleben mission. Pentz is to Jacobsen's left

Lt David Shelhamer's crew with B-17F 42-5341 GN-Q *VICIOUS VIRGIN* of the 427th BS. Shelhamer is standing in the back row at far right



'With good hard work, expending a lot of ammo and smart evasive action, we came through it in pretty fair shape. No ships were lost, but five crewmen were wounded and one killed. As I've said, this is a hot group. The 91st BG lost 11 ships. Of the force that went there, 36 B-17s were lost - some haul.'

Sgt Zimba of the ground echelon wrote, 'A whole squadron of about five bombers were wiped out that were flying above our group. If our gunners weren't on the ball we would have lost some aeroplanes'.

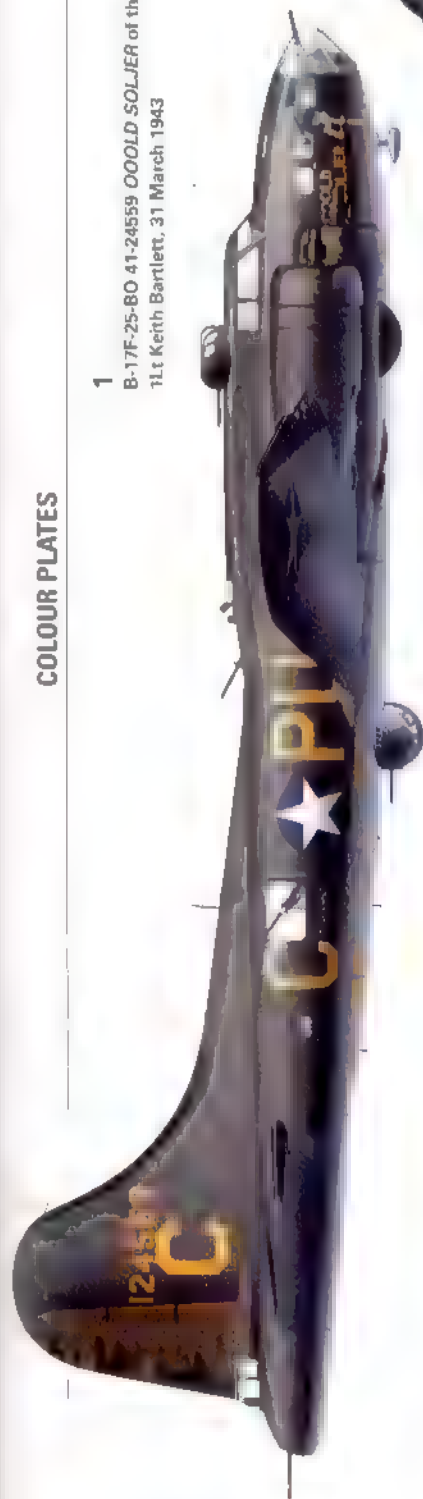
The weeks after the Regensburg-Schweinfurt mission were a repetition of 'Blitz Week's' aftermath - a time for recuperation and replacement with missions against 'easy' targets in France, Holland and Belgium. The group's next raid, on 19 August against Gilze-Rijen aerodrome in Holland, was anything but. Lt Shelhamer wrote:

'After a rough one like Schweinfurt, and everyone coming home okay, the boys went on what was termed a "milk run" yesterday and our squadron lost one ship. Quilland was flying this one, his very first mission - ten 'chutes came out, so they are probably prisoners of war. One other squadron here lost a ship too - Nix, on his 24th raid, went down. Just a milk run to Belgium with P-47 escort all the way. Like Hell, they are never milk runs until everyone comes back home.'

Lt James Nix's 358th BS crew in *G-for-George* fell to fighters. This was the same aircraft Col Stevens had taken to Schweinfurt. Nix was one of four who died. Lt Lauren Quillen's crew in *STRIC-NINE* fell to flak near the coast, with six dead, including Quillen. Many B-17s returned with severe damage and at least six men were wounded. The group flew a six aircraft air-sea rescue search on 23 August. The B-17s caught a Dornier Do 24 flying boat on the water, engines running, and destroyed it.

During the 27 August raid against V1 facilities near Watten, the bomb-run was made at 16,000 ft against extremely accurate flak. Many witnessed the grotesque sight of the 360th BS's *SHANGRI-LA-LIL*, flown by 2Lt George Crockett Jr's crew, being virtually blown in half forward of the bomb-bay. The rear fuselage and wing continued in formation for a few seconds, dangling remnants of the nose. Seven crew survived including, incredibly, the pilot and navigator. Bombing was poor because of the sun. On the 31st, the 358th BS's *Augerhead* fell to (text continues on page 81)

COLOUR PLATES



1

B-17F-25-BO 41-24559 *OOOLD SOLJER* of the 350th, flown by 1Lt Kerth Bartlett, 31 March 1943

2
B-17F-25-BO 41-24561 *THE DUCHESS* of the 358th BS, flown by 1Lt Harold Stouse, Spring 1944



3

B-17F-25-BO 41-24562 *Sky Wolf* of the 358th BS, flown by 1Lt Aubrey Emerson, 11 January 1944





4

B-17F-25-BO 41-24577 *HELL'S ANGELS* of the 358th BS, flown by Capt Merle Hungerford, 26 January 1943

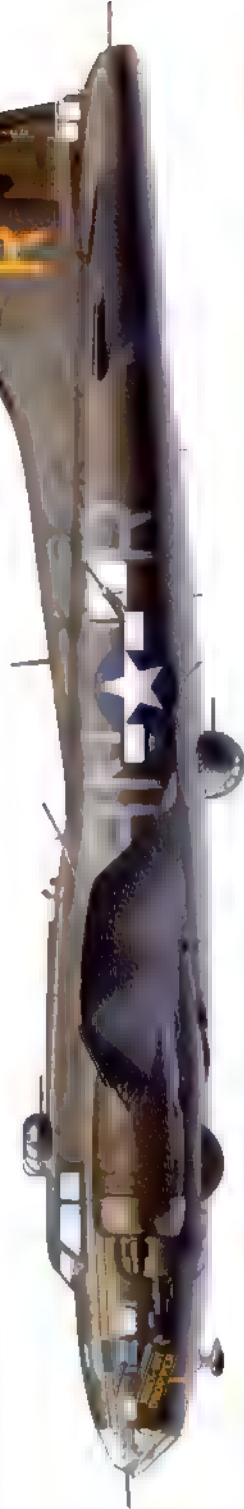
5

B-17F-27-BO 41-24587 *BAD CHECK* of the 427th BS, flown by 1Lt George McClellan, 11 January 1944



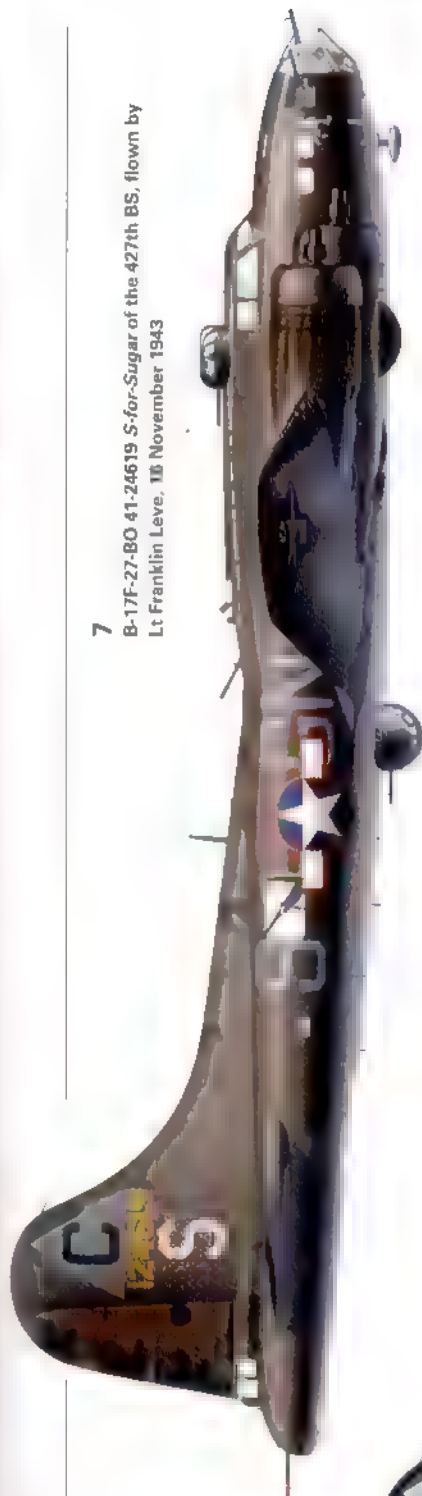
6

B-17F-27-BO 41-24605 *KNOCK-OUT DROPPER* of the 359th BS, flown by 1Lt John Savage, 27 March 1944



7

B-17F-27-BO 41-24619 *S-for-Sugar* of the 427th BS, flown by Lt Franklin Leve, 10 November 1943



8

B-17F-27-BO 41-24635 *THE 8 BALL Mk II* of the 359th BS, flown by Brig Gen Robert Travis and Lt Col William Calhoun, 11 January 1944



9

B-17F-5-DL 42-2973 *IZA-VAILABLE* of the 360th BS, flown by 1Lt Robert Cogswell, 17 August 1943



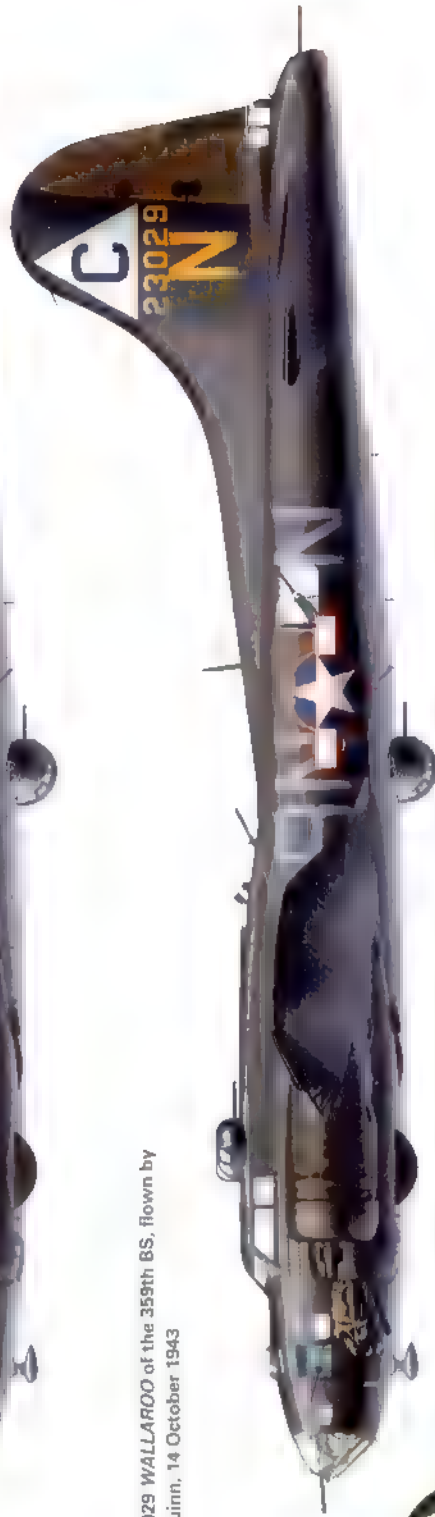
10

B-17F-10-DL 42-3002 *The Old Squaw* of the 359th BS, flown by Lt Robert Hullar, 6 September 1943



11

B-17F-15-DL 42-3029 *WALLAROO* of the 359th BS, flown by Flt Off Thomas Quinn, 14 October 1943



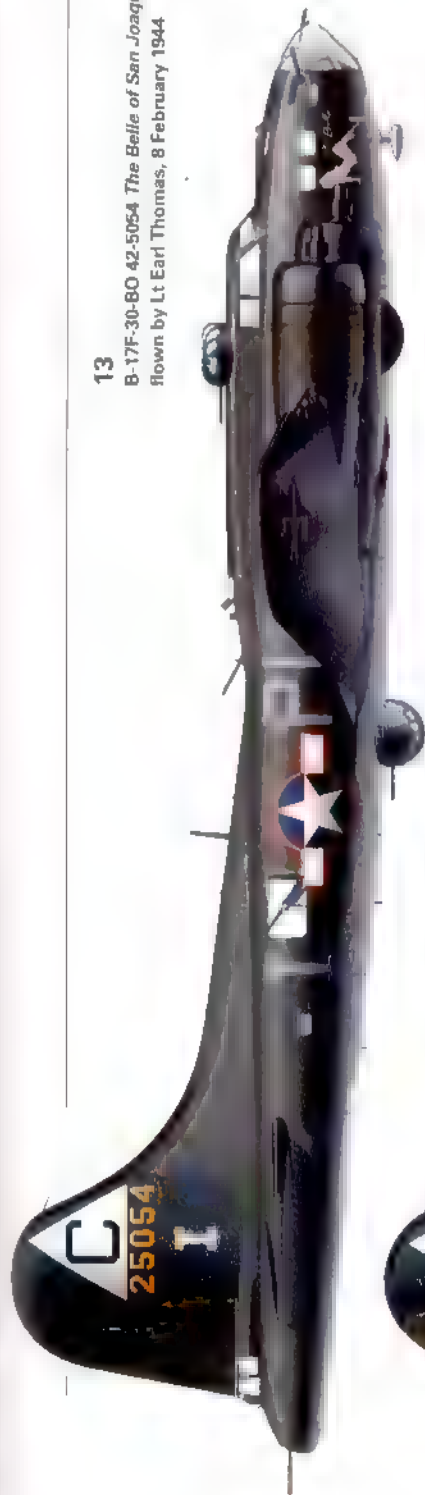
12

B-17F-25-DL 42-3131 *'FLAK-WOLF'*, also known as *Winnie the Pooh*, of the 427th BS, flown by Lt Robert Hullar, 16 August 1943



13

B-17F-30-BO 42-5054 *The Belle of San Joaquin* of the 360th BS,
flown by Lt Earl Thomas, 8 February 1944



14

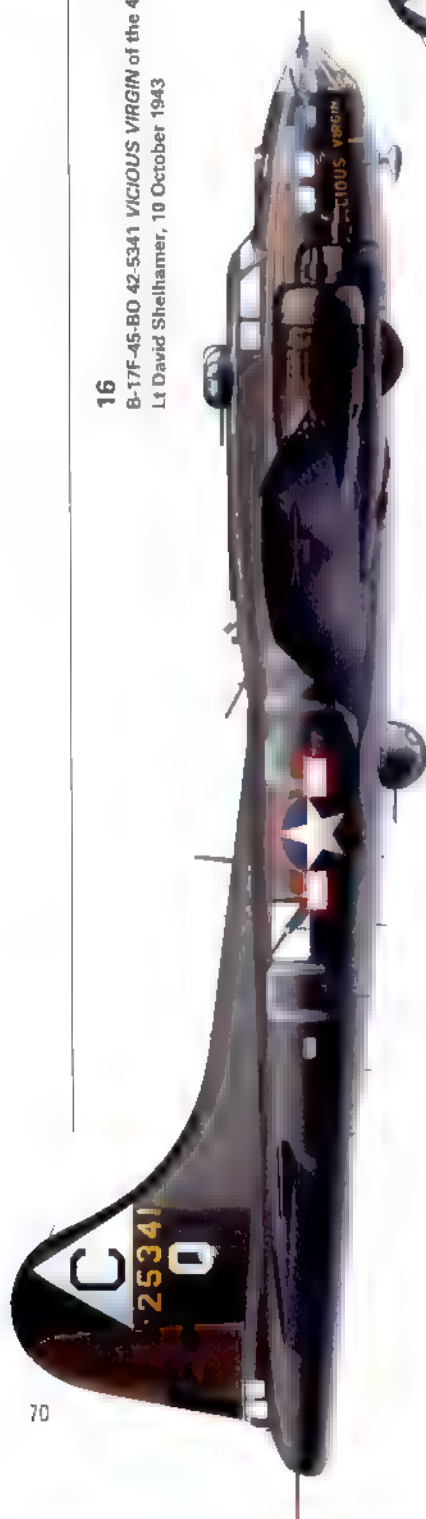
B-17F-35-BO 42-5081 *Luscious Lady* of the 427th BS, flown by
Lt Robert Hullar, 14 October 1943



15

B-17F-45-BO 42-5264 *YANKEE DOODLE DANDY* of the 358th BS,
flown by 1Lt John Henderson, 11 January 1944





16

B-17F-45-BO 42-5341 *VICIOUS VIRGIN* of the 427th BS, flown by
Lt David Shelhamer, 10 October 1943

17

B-17F-50-BO 42-5360 *War Bride*, also known as *Old Faithful*, of the
358th BS, flown by 1Lt John Hendry Jr, 14 October 1943



18

B-17F-50-BO 42-5382 *The "WITCHES' TIT"* of the 360th BS, flown by
1Lt David Mack, 25 June 1943



19

B-17F-50-BO 42-5393 *THUMPER AGAIN*, also known as *THE LITTLE WOMAN* and *Just for LAFFS*, of the 360th BS, 15 June 1943



20

B-17F-50-BO 42-5432 *'THE HUNTING CLUB'*, also known as *Just for Laughs*, of the 358th BS, flown by 1Lt Ray W. Jess, 22 June 1943



21

B-17F-50-BO 42-5434 *LADY LUCK*, also known as *Bob's Boudoir* and *SHAD RACK*, of the 360th BS, flown by Lt Lloyd Griffin, 16 April 1943



22

YB-40 42-5736 *Tampa Tornado* of the 359th BS, August 1943



23

B-17F-25-VE 42-5854 *Alley Oop* of the 360th BS, flown by
Lt Henry Glass, 23 March 1944



24

B-17F-60-BO 42-29571 "*Charley Horse*" of the 358th BS, flown by
2Lt William Hartigan, 20 October 1943



25

B-17F-60-BO 42-29573 "Two Beavers" of the 358th BS, flown by
2Lt James Dunn, 31 March 1943



26

B-17F-65-BO 42-29664 *Jersey Bounce Jr* of the 358th BS, flown by
1Lt John Henderson, 20 December 1943



27

B-17F-75-BO 42-29931 *SATAN'S WORKSHOP!!*, also known as
Devil's Workshop, of the 359th BS, flown by Brig Gen Robert Travis
and Maj Lewis Lyle, 6 September 1943



28

B-17F-80-BO 42-29995 *MR FIVE BY FIVE* of the 427th BS, flown by Maj Edgar Snyder Jr and Capt Alexander Strickland, 14 October 1943



29

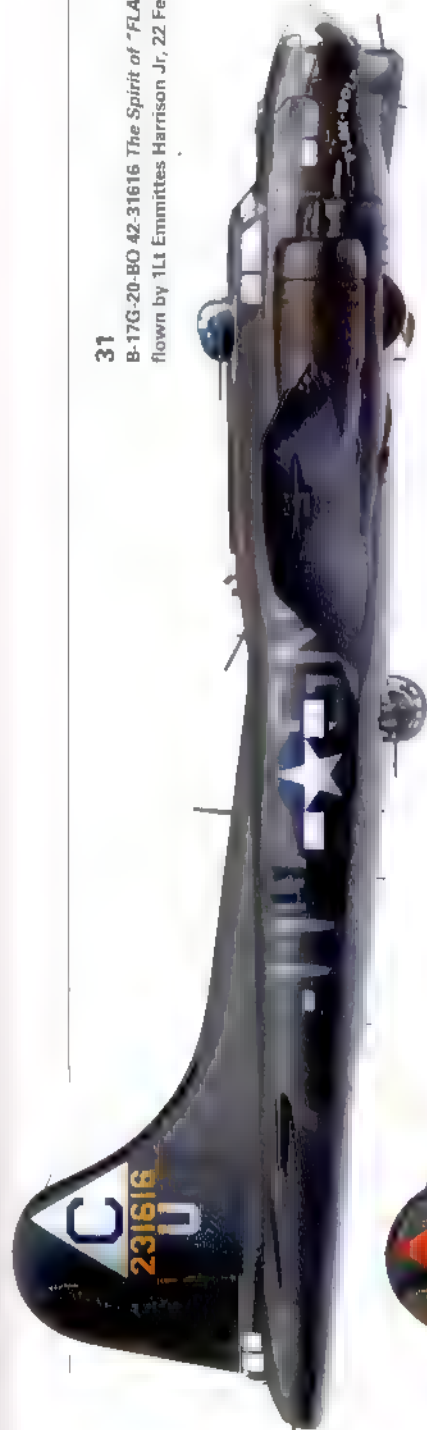
B-17G-1-BO 42-31060 *POGUE MA HONE* of the 427th BS, flown by Lt Kenneth Brangwin, May 1944



30

B-17G-10-BO 42-31241 *Spirit of Wanette*, also known as *City of Wanette*, of the 427th BS, flown by Lt Edward Woddrup, 20 December 1943





31

B-17G-20-BO 42-31616 *The Spirit of "FLAK-WOLF"* of the 427th BS, flown by 1Lt Emmittes Harrison Jr, 22 February 1944



32

B-17G-35-BO 42-32027 *Betty Jane* of the 427th BS, flown by 1Lt Carl Dubose Jr, 11 August 1944

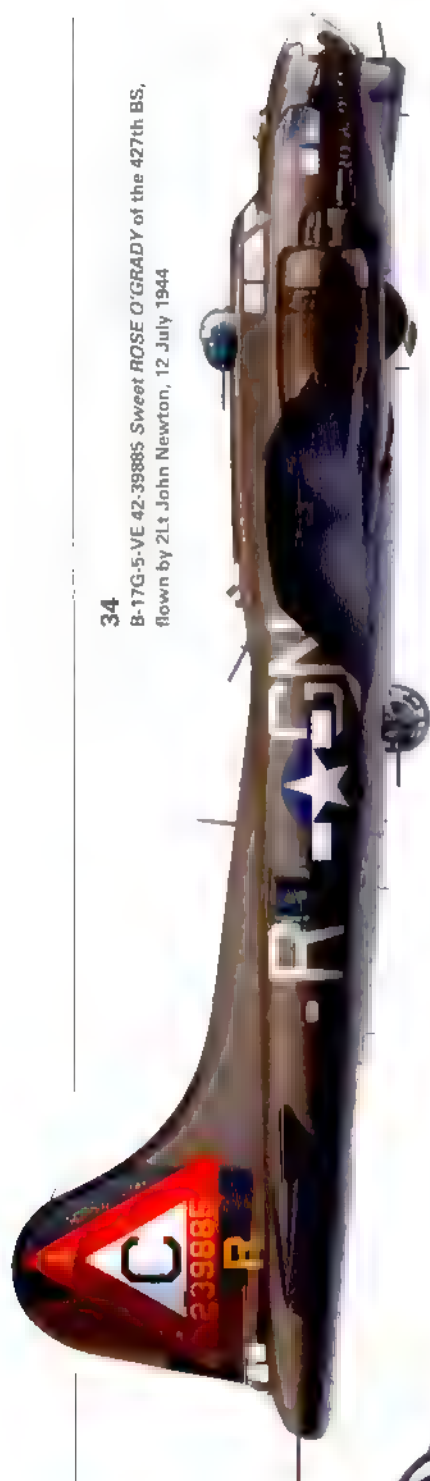


33

B-17G-1-VE 42-39769 *MISSMANOOKI* of the 359th BS, flown by 2Lt Billy Goolsby, 11 November 1943

34

B-17G-5-VE 42-39885 *Sweet ROSE O'GRADY* of the 427th BS,
flown by 2Lt John Newton, 12 July 1944



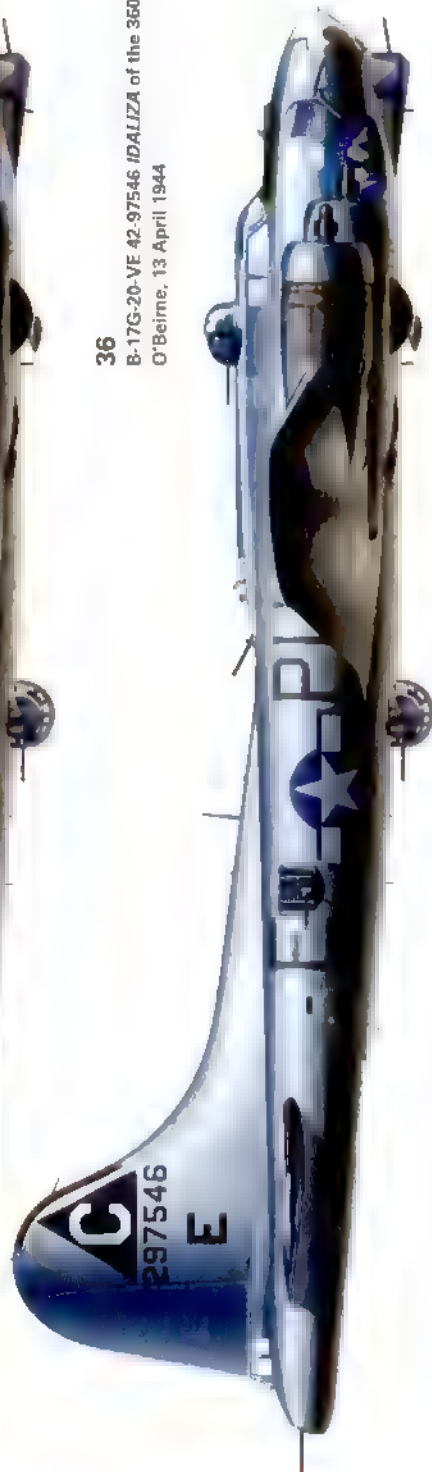
35

B-17G-45-BO 42-97298 *The FLOOSE* of the 358th BS, flown by
2Lt Lawrence Stein, 13 July 1944



36

B-17G-20-VE 42-97546 *IDLALIZA* of the 360th BS, flown by 2Lt Nelson
O'Beime, 13 April 1944



37

B-17G-65-BO 43-37590 *Neva The Silver Lady* of the 358th BS, flown by 1Lt Harry Gobrecht, 8 March 1945



38

B-17G-85-BO 43-38289 *Sweet Laffronda* of the 359th BS, flown by 1Lt Lawrence Harding, 8 March 1945



39

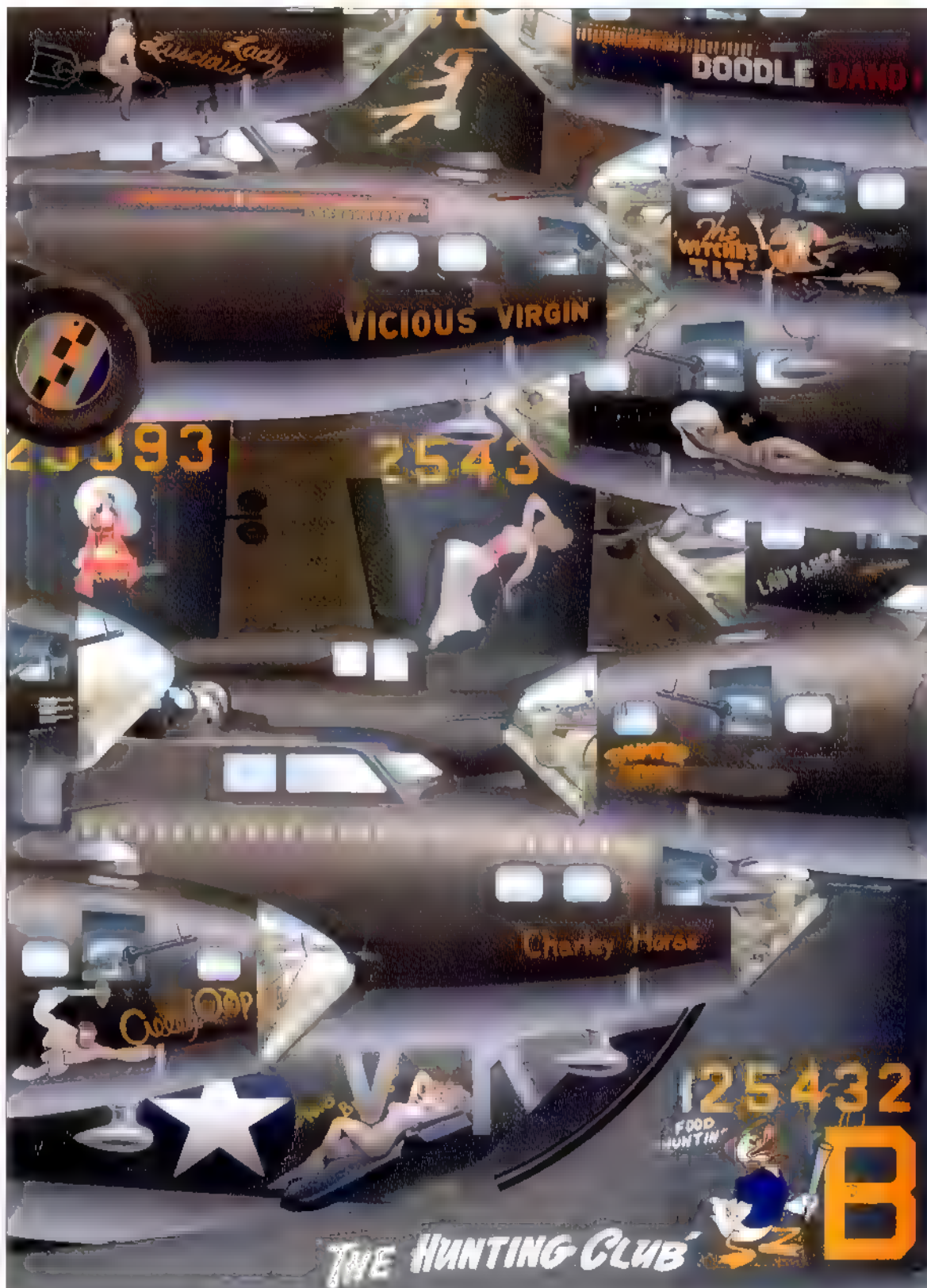
B-17G-105-BO 43-39160 *G-for-George*, also known as "Lil Bit", of the 358th BS, flown by 2Lt Francis Taub, 20 March 1945



This section has been specially created by profile artist Mark Styling so as to better illustrate the colourful, and numerous, artworks worn by the 303rd BGI's Flying Fortresses featured in profile. These drawings have

been produced following exhaustive cross-referencing with the published bomb group history, correspondence with surviving veterans and the detailed study of original photographs by the author.









The remains of B-17F 42-29754 PU-B *SHANGRI-LA LIL* of the 360th BS are examined by Luftwaffe personnel after it was shot down near Watten, France, on 27 August 1943



fighters on a raid against Amiens-Cilly aerodrome. Fighters also shot off the tail-gunner's legs as he descended in his parachute.

By early September, Eaker had enough replacements to attempt a long-range raid against Stuttgart. Leading the mission was Brig Gen Robert Travis, the new CO of 41st CBW, who flew with Lyle in *Satan's Workshop*. Fighters over Stuttgart and extreme range turned the raid into a fiasco as B-17s ran out of fuel on the return leg. The Eighth lost 45 out of 338 dispatched, including the 359th BS's *The Old Squaw*, which ditched with Lt Robert Hullar's 427th BS crew just short of England. Picked up by an RAF rescue-launch, the crew lived to fight again, and completed their tour in February 1944.

The Stuttgart setback brought a return of short-penetration missions. The 303rd flew six in September without loss. By early October the Eighth Air Force started using RAF radar-bombing methods to allow 'blind-bombing' through cloud-cover. The group lost the 360th BS's *Yardbird II* to fighters (with 11 killed) on such a mission against Emden on 2 October. It exploded so violently during its final dive that Sgt Merlin Miller, tail-gunner in Lt Hullar's crew, compared the remains to

SHANGRI-LA LIL appears remarkably intact, given the extensive damage to its forward fuselage

confetti fluttering in the air. The group also lost a 'no name' 359th BS aircraft and ten of its crew as PoWs on a regular raid against Frankfurt-Main on 4 October.

The stage was now set for 'Black Week' – the worst seven-day period in the Eighth's history. Although the 2nd Division's B-24s were now in England in four-group strength (of 50+ aircraft per group), they still largely flew on diversion missions for the B-17s. The 'heavy-lifting' was done by some 335 Fortresses of the 1st and 3rd Divisions. There were six P-47 groups with approximately 274 aircraft, but their range for deep B-17 penetration missions was limited to little further than the western German border near Aachen.

Like the unescorted raids of August 1943, the missions flown during 'Black Week' form the subject of countless books. Not surprisingly, for 27 B-17s were lost on the 8 August attack on Bremen, while another 26 failed to return from missions to Marienburg, Anklam and Danzig, in eastern Germany, on 9 October. On the 10th the 3rd Division was decimated on a raid to Münster, losing 29 B-17s, while the 1st Division lost one. Of this total, 12 were lost by the 100th BGI, eight by the 390th BGI and five by the 95th BGI. Finally, on 'black Thursday' – the return to Schweinfurt on 14 October – 60 B-17s out of 291 dispatched fell. This total included six from the 92nd BGI, thirteen from the 305th BGI, ten from the 306th BGI, six from the 379th BGI and six from the 384th BGI, the latter two groups flying in the 41st CBW with the 303rd.

During these four terrible missions the 303rd lost just two aircraft to enemy action, while another was abandoned in the air over England. What accounts for such an extraordinary outcome? On the Bremen mission the 303rd got good protection from P-47s and was a 'high group' in the wing formation at 28,000 ft, well above the city's effective flak, which now rivalled that of the original 'flak city', St Nazaire. Maj Walter Shayler, mission leader and 360th BS CO, said, 'We were lucky enough to fly above most of it, but it must have been hell for the boys flying below us'.

At Anklam, the group's route over the Baltic resulted in complete tactical surprise. With perfect visibility and no flak, the 303rd's attack on the Arado aircraft factory was devastating. 1Lt Byron Butt thought it 'a damn well-planned, well-executed mission by all concerned'. But the Luftwaffe caught the formation on the way out and the 427th BS's *Son* was hit by 20 mm cannon fire from three Fw 190s flying abreast near the Danish coast.



Brig Gen Robert Travis, 41st CBW CO, chats with members of the 303rd's operations section after the difficult Stuttgart mission of 6 September 1943. Maj Lewis Lyle is standing to the left of the photograph in his A-2 flight jacket

Son fell out of formation with its No 3 engine on fire and feathered. Ten parachutes were seen, but Lt Bernard Clifford's entire crew drowned.

The Münster mission represented a debacle for the 41st CBW, as navigational error by the wing lead navigator in the inexperienced 384th BG put the entire formation off course over the Ruhr's notorious 'happy valley' flak defences. Here, the group did have 'luck', particularly the 427th BS's *"FLAK-WOLF"*. As Lt 'Woody' Woddrup put the aircraft into a steep bank, a dud flak shell at the end of its trajectory passed between the pilots' seats and through the cockpit roof. Coesfeld was a target of opportunity the 303rd bombed with little effect.

The key to understanding the group's performance during 'Black Week' is provided by the events on the second Schweinfurt raid. German fighters had as much success against the group's tight formation as Napoleon's cavalry did against Wellington's infantry squares at Waterloo. Under the leadership of 427th CO Maj Ed Snyder and Capt Alexander Strickland's crew in *AIR FIVE BY FIVE*, the 303rd's pilots and crews knew exactly what to do. Precisely-timed evasive action was a major factor.

For example, Lt Shelhamer knew precisely the moment to dive *VICIOUS VIRGIN* to avoid a ramming-attack by an Fw 190. Flt Off Thomas Quinn and Lt Jack Hendry in *WALLAROO* and *War Bride* kicked their aircraft around so naturally they frequently exchanged positions in the formation. Sgt Merlin Miller in the tail of Lt Hullah's *Luscious Lady* 'sneezed first' as a 30 mm cannon-armed Bf 109 lined up on him – his defensive fire blew a wing off the fighter before it could attack. In time, persistent Bf 110 attacks disabled the 358th's *Joan of Arc*. It crashed, killing two crewmembers and sending nine into captivity. But when lead bombardier Lt James McCormick lined-up on the group's target over Schweinfurt, neither flak nor continuing fighter attacks prevented him from executing a perfect bomb run.

Of course, the group's aircraft returned to England badly battered, and the 359th BS's *Car-O'-Nine-Tails* had to be abandoned in flight because it

B-17F 42-3131 GN-U "FLAK-WOLF" of the 427th BS was yet another 303rd BG machine to boast main wheel hub decoration. Note that it also had a field-installed twin 0.50-cal mounting in the nose



was no longer controllable, but on 'Black Thursday' the 'Hell's Angels' proved just how good they had become. Still, the Eighth could not afford to lose 155 of 335 B-17s dispatched on four missions. The public relations impact was so great that the Eighth's leadership even enlisted Maj Snyder to make a radio broadcast that was heard all over America. He emphasised that he had seen a lot of parachutes coming from shot down B-17s.

The Eighth mounted only one more heavy bomber operation in October, in which five B-17s were lost. It was depressingly similar to the Gilze-Rijen mission after the first Schweinfurt raid, even to the point of it being advertised as a 'milk-run'. The target on 20 October was Düren, a 'transportation centre' just inside the German border. Heavy cloud caused a recall, but not before there was a surprise head-on attack by 15 to 20 fighters hiding in a cloudbank. They shot down the 358th BS's *Charlie Horse*, killing one crew member, plus an unnamed B-17. Lt Hendry, who had no time to take evasive action, flew the latter. Hendry was on his 24th mission, but survived. His radioman, Sgt James Brown, was a natural leader greatly respected by his crewmates. It was his 25th mission, and he was one of two in the crew to die.

For the inevitable rebuilding, B-17 groups began to receive a steady stream of new G-model aircraft with internal wingtip 'Tokyo-tanks' to increase range and YB-40-style twin-gun chin turrets to improve forward defence. By 19 October the 303rd had 25 on hand. In a month's time the flow of new crews and aircraft had become a flood as the fighting strength of each bomb group doubled. A single bomber group could now field two separate group formations. And the number of new Eighth units was increasing as well.

It is an open question whether its leadership completely accepted that daylight bombing could not succeed without long-range escorts. But most missions in November and December 1943 were conducted within P-47 range. Two new fighter groups, the 20th and the 55th, augmented the P-47s with twin-engined P-38s. They had had longer legs but ultimately proved unsuitable for high altitude operations. In the event, deep penetration missions did not resume until the P-51B's debut in January 1944.

It would be a mistake to conclude that VIII Bomber Command had it easy for the rest of 1943. The Eighth kept up the pressure, flying many escorted missions against German cities near the northern coast and along the Reich's western border. Six raids were launched against Bremen, prompting significant strengthening of its already-formidable flak and fighter defences. As winter neared, some of the fiercest fighting of the air war took place in the freezing cold skies above the city. This resulted in the presentation of two major awards for bravery to 303rd members.

The next mission was to Wilhelmshaven on 3 November. For the first time P-38s escorted the 303rd, employing a new close-escort tactic. They intercepted German fighters positioning for attack and, according to Lt McSween of Lt Gamble's crew, 'definitely saved our hides'. All crews were thrilled to see their enemies being shot down as the German pilots fumbled their reaction to a new US fighter with unknown strengths. The bombers employed 'blind' or 'pathfinder force' (PFF) radar bombing, and results were unobserved, but all group aircraft returned safely.

Two days later, the group flew a PFF strike against Gelsenkirchen, with P-47 and P-38 escort. The 359th BS's *Ramblin Wreck*, the former

IDAHO POTATO PEELER, was lost, with nine of its crew being captured and one killed. On the 16th the group attacked a molybdenum mine in Knaben, Norway, using B-17Gs for the first time. Snow prevented the group finding the target, and most aircraft brought their bombs back. But the 303rd got credit for another Eighth 'first' – *Knockout Dropper* was the first B-17 to complete 50 missions in the European theatre, beating out its only real competitors, *HELL'S ANGELS* and *S-for-Sugar*.

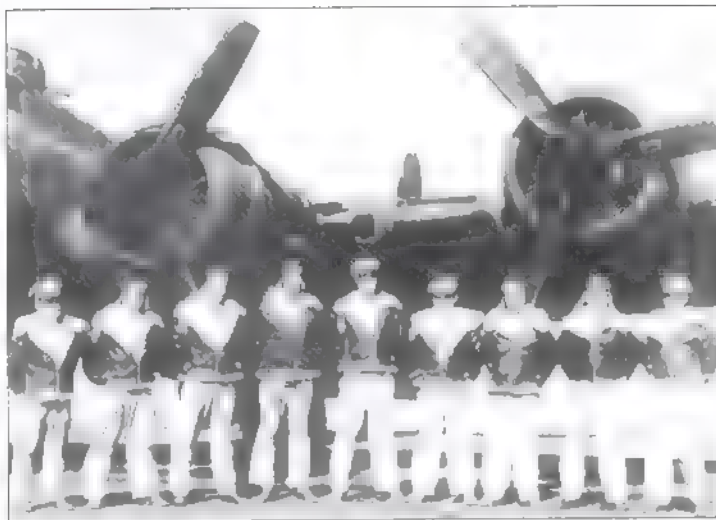
It was cold, dreary and overcast on 26 November, and 358th BS bombardier Lt Charles Spencer was flying with Lt Bill Fort's crew in *Star Dust*. With Spencer was navigator Lt Harold Rocketto, flying his first mission. There was one of 37 303rd aircraft leading 505 B-17s and B-24s to Bremen for a PFF attack. Remarkably, another 128 3rd Division B-17s were heading to attack industrial targets in Paris – a telling sign of the Eighth's new strength.

Brig Gen Travis was mission leader, flying near *Star Dust* in a PFF-equipped 142X B-17 from the 482nd BGI. But command mistakes due to poor radio discipline left the B-17s without escort, and wide open to head-on attacks by Fw 190s. *Star Dust*'s Plexiglas nose was destroyed by 20 mm shells which killed Rocketto and knocked out half the oxygen system. Spencer was wounded in the face, but when the engineer, Sgt Grover Mullins, tried to pull him to a place of shelter, the bombardier would not abandon the nose guns. He returned to them even though the outside temperature was -60°C and air was blasting in at 150 kts. Spencer collapsed and was given up for dead. His face was swollen so badly an oxygen mask would not fit, and the aircraft was at 26,000 ft.

After an extraordinary journey, Fort landed *Star Dust* in Scotland, while Mullins did yeoman service getting portable oxygen to the crew without it. He also assisted in the landing because Fort's fingers were literally frozen around the control column by the cold. By a miracle, Spencer survived. He was awarded the DSC for extraordinary valour in returning to *Star Dust*'s nose to protect his crew. Despite disfiguring, and disabling injuries to his face, eyes, feet and hands, he lived a long life of service as a Baptist minister, enjoying the support of his extraordinary wife, Jeanne.

Grover Mullins received the Silver Star and continued flying until shot down on 11 January 1944. It proved to be Fort's last mission because of permanent hand injuries, including the loss of several fingers. Other 303rd crews were badly hit by fighters and flak in a fierce defence of Bremen. All returned except Capt Côté's crew in *MR FIVE BY FIVE*, which ditched in the North Sea, killing ten men. Côté's wife, who was pregnant with their first child, never recovered from his loss.

Three days later the group lost two 360th aircraft, *Red Ace* (four killed, six captured) and *Dark Horse* in another Bremen attack. In the latter, flak blew off the right horizontal stabiliser and most of tail-gunner Sgt Joseph Sawicki's left arm. He was also grievously wounded in the abdomen, but went forward to the waist, where he discovered both gunners lying on the floor, immobilised by their wounds. Despite his injuries, Sawicki manhandled both men to the rear door, made sure their parachutes were secured and pushed them out. Both men managed to pull their ripcords and parachute to safety. Sawicki's body was found in the crashed aircraft, along with that of the ball-turret gunner. He never received official recognition for his sacrifice, and well represents the Eighth's many unknown heroes.



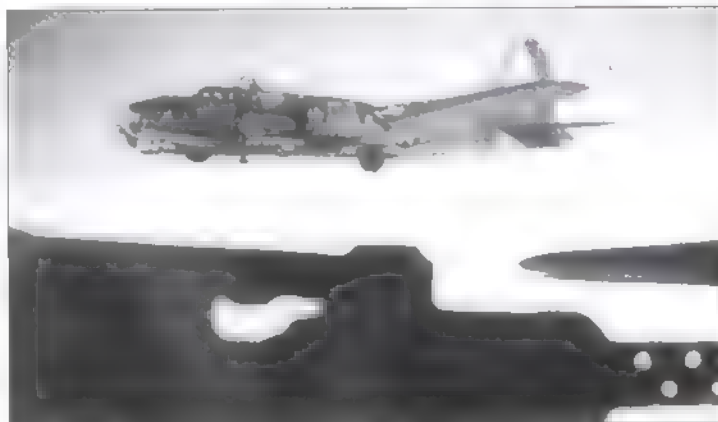
Lt John Henderson's crew in a stateside training photo. Henderson is in the centre, with future Medal of Honor recipient S/Sgt Forrest Vosler fourth from left (William Simpkins)

The next mission, on 20 December, was not so easy. One of 21 303rd crews taking part was Lt John Henderson's of the 358th in *Jersey Bounce Jr*. Another was 'Woody' Woddrup's of the 427th in B-17G *Spirit of Wanette*. The Luftwaffe was up in force and the flak was bursting in 16-shell clusters. It set *Jersey Bounce Jr*'s No 1 engine on fire and Henderson dived out of formation to try and extinguish it. Fighters moved in to pick off the straggler, but Henderson's crew put up a furious defence, during which tail-gunner Sgt George Buske was badly wounded and the No 4 engine knocked out. S/Sgt Forrest K Vosler, 19, was also wounded by shrapnel but manned the radio-room gun to fight off a twin-engined fighter attacking the unprotected tail. In an almost face-to-face confrontation with the German pilot, Vosler scored some hits, driving the fighter off. Moments later Vosler was peppered from head to toe with 20 mm shrapnel which wounded both eyes, gravely impairing his vision.

As the B-17 headed back over the North Sea, Vosler was able to set up the aircraft's radio to broadcast an SOS, despite being half-blind and delirious from his wounds. Rescue ships and aircraft were on the scene when *Jersey Bounce Jr* ditched. While the crew was evacuating the radio-room, Vosler then saved Buske's life. He grabbed the badly-injured tail-gunner before Buske slid into the water from the wing's trailing edge and called his

December 1943 was marked by 303rd attacks using PFF or visual bombing – Solingen on 1 December, St Jean D'Angely on the 5th, London on the 11th, Bremen on the 13th and again on the 16th. The only losses were on the Solingen mission when a 360th BS B-17G fell to flak near Aachen and a 427th B-17G ran out of fuel just short of England and ditched, its crew being rescued. The mission on the 13th was so well executed that the group received a letter of commendation from Travis. But that mission, like the next Bremen raid on the 16th, had been relatively easy.

Framed by the starboard 0.50-cal waist gun, B-17G 42-31241 GN-W *Spirit of Wanette* of the 427th BS cruises at high altitude over a seemingly solid undercast. This evocative photograph was taken by David Shelhamer in the late autumn of 1943



crewmates to help pull him back. His vision permanently impaired, Vosler was awarded the Medal of Honor for conduct clearly above and beyond the call of duty.

Meantime, *Spirit of Wanette* was in trouble, with its right wingtip and Tokyo-rank blown apart by a dud flak shell and one engine knocked out and another crippled by a malfunctioning supercharger. In this condition, and with all but one gun frozen by extreme cold, Woddrup made the evasion of multiple twin-engined fighter attacks which was to earn him the Silver Star. His co-pilot, Lt Grover Henderson, was in the

nose getting navigator Lt Elmer Brown's help in cutting away a burning electrical 'blue-bunny' suit while Woddrup handled the aircraft. Flying it 'like a fighter', he manoeuvred so violently that his tail-gunner, Sgt 'Charlie' Bagges, actually hit the roof of his compartment and was temporarily knocked out.

Once again crew teamwork was critical in getting a B-17 home. The top-turret gunner, Sgt William Watts, destroyed the most persistent attacker, an Me 410, with *Spirit of Wanette's* one functioning gun during the fighter's third pass when it riddled the B-17's top-turret and ammunition boxes. Watts later destroyed at least one other twin-engined fighter. Meanwhile, radioman Sgt W C O'Connor saved the two waist gunners, Sgts Valis and Hoff, with walk-around oxygen after they had been knocked unconscious by an explosion just outside the waist. He did this despite badly frost-bitten hands, and was recommended for an award. It was a greatly relieved crew which walked away from *Spirit of Wanette* after landing that afternoon.

Two other 427th crews were not so fortunate. Lt Alexander Alex's fell to flak in the 359th B-17G *Santa Ana*, with nine crewmen captured and one killed. Lt Franklin Levee's B-17G (in which eight were killed and two captured) was knocked down by two air-to-air rockets. But nothing the Luftwaffe could do prevented the group from dropping its bombs on target.

Christmas Eve brought an easy, no-loss mission against V1 sites near Vacqueriette. This was followed by a holiday party for local children, complete with Father Christmas arriving in a B-17 filled with gifts purchased by group members. Then came the 303rd's last missions of 1943. On 30 December there was a PFF raid on Ludwigshafen, in which the 359th BS lost B-17G *Woman's Home Companion*, with three killed and five captured. On New Year's Eve the group flew its 94th mission, a sortie against a German blockade-runner beached near the port of Bordeaux, but the target was obscured by cloud.

The end of 1943 signalled that the 303rd had weathered the crisis in daylight bombing in good shape. It would next play a key role in the difficult early-1944 battles, which ended the crisis, and irreversibly turned the tide of war against the Luftwaffe.



Specially staged for the cameras following their remarkable 20 December 1943 mission, Lt Edward Woddrup's crew 'leaves' *Spirit of Wanette*. Note that repairs to the battle damage inflicted on the bomber's waist have already started, but the wing tip is a bigger job. 'Woody' Woddrup is third from left, arms raised in a boxer's salute

TURNING THE TIDE

The year 1944 opened with two difficult missions to Kiel. On 4 January the 303rd dispatched 38 aircraft in two group formations. Col Stevens led one, flying with Lt Hullar's crew in *VICIOUS VIRGIN*, but many aborts resulted in only 14 aircraft arriving over the City – a dangerous situation. The B-17s flew through heavy flak, but seven entered cloud, failed PFF equipment and a heavy smokescreen meant poor bombing. The second 303rd formation failed to bomb at all.

The high point came when twin-engined fighters intercepting the group were met by P-51s, which made mincemeat of them, with P-38s providing assistance. The bomber crews' feelings can be imagined. The low point, though, came during the return journey over the North Sea. Lt Fred Humphries' 427th crew, 16-mission veterans, fell behind in a brand-new B-17G called *Sweet Anna*. Again the waters claimed an entire crew.

A return to Kiel was planned for the next day to address 'unfinished business', but planning was poor. The 303rd assembled in pre-dawn semi-darkness, and there was a head-on collision between Lt Benajah Burkitt's new 360th B-17G and a 379th B-17 from Kimbolton, four miles away. As Sgt Zimba recorded, 'What an explosion – bombs were going off until eleven o'clock from eight onwards. The supply shack shook. I was sleeping out in the shack'. There were no survivors on Burkitt's crew, and eight in the 379th aircraft died. The group's formations never fully formed after this, and only 12 B-17s arrived over Kiel. Eight dropped their bombs on target, but fighter opposition was minimal due to the presence of escorts, and flak claimed no victims.

It was an historic day for the Eighth Air Force when, on 6 January, Gen 'Jimmy' Doolittle replaced Ira Eaker as commander – Eisenhower had wanted his 'own man' in the job. It is easy to sympathise with Eaker, who had been in command of the Eighth from its very beginnings. He now assumed command of USAAF Mediterranean forces, including the strategic Fifteenth Air Force. Gen Spaatz was elevated to overall command of both the Eighth and the Fifteenth under the acronym USSTAF – United States Strategic Air Forces (Europe).

The next day was marked by another historic event, albeit one of lesser strategic significance. After a vote by group staff and squadron COs, the 303rd adopted the name 'Hell's Angels' for all its future publicity – the public would no longer hear of it as a nameless group from 'a Flying Fortress base somewhere in England'. Public attention would finally come to what 303rd personnel felt was 'the best damn unit in the whole Eighth Air Force'.

On the 11th the 303rd enjoyed what can be considered its finest hour when Doolittle's staff planned the kind of deep penetration not tried since 'Black Week' against a cluster of aircraft factories south of Berlin. The 354th FG's P-51s would provide escort in the target area while P-47s and P-38s would offer coverage to and from the target area. The 41st CBW under Travis was selected to lead the assault. The 303rd was to head the wing, fielding lead and low groups, while the 379th contributed a high

group. Leading the entire armada was the 359th's *THE 8 BALL Mk II*, with Lt Col Calhoun flying and Travis in the co-pilot's seat. Up front were a lead navigator, assistant navigator Lt Darrell Gust, and a crackerjack bombardier, Capt Jack Fawcett, who had completed his 25 missions and volunteered for five more. Fawcett was nonchalant about it, and tempted by the group's 'meaty target' – two adjoining Focke-Wulf factories responsible for 48 per cent of Fw 190 output. Gust was less sanguine. It was his 25th mission, and also his first wedding anniversary. He was ready but apprehensive, and before climbing aboard he went behind *THE 8 BALL Mk II*'s tail and threw-up.

In case of cloud cover, a single H2X-equipped PFF B-17 from the 482nd BCG flew in the lead squadron in the number two position to *THE 8 BALL Mk II*'s right. But Lt Henry Eich Jr's perspective provides a better view – Eich's Molesworth-based 359th BS crew was on its eighth mission in B-17F 42-3448:

'The cloud cover was heavy, and we had to climb through it and assemble on a "splasher" (radio) beacon. Over the English Channel we received a message that we would have no fighter escort as the weather would remain poor for the fighters' return. I heard no return message from the lead ship with Gen Travis. We were flying in the number four spot, just below and behind the lead aeroplane. As soon as we crossed the coastline the Fw 190s were on us. Most of them did not invert, but came straight through. It looked as if they were really after the lead plane. By using some evasive action, I thought we had escaped the initial attacks, but our No 2 engine lost most of its power. I was reluctant to feather it because we still had a long way to go. Suddenly, the aeroplane on our left wing exploded. I did not see what hit it, but there was no chance of anyone baling out. It was our room mates, the crew of Lt Purcell.'

Lt William Purcell's crew was flying B-17F *Baltimore Bounce* just above and to the left of Eich in the number three squadron slot. Some said a wing came off, others that it left the formation, rolled over on its back and crashed. There were no survivors.

The fighters were going after the lead ship. Calhoun commented, 'The fighters were desperate today. A group of 30 Fw 190s came at us head-on, and I had to lift a wing once to keep one from hitting us'. His bravado long gone, Fawcett stared in disbelief from the Plexiglas nose while the Fw 190 positioned itself to ram. As its 'dark grey mass' passed beneath the B-17's raised right wing, its own tilted upwards. Fawcett thought, 'nice going, Cal!' Eich continues the story:

'Shortly after (Purcell's loss) a Fw 190 came directly at us and I did not move quickly enough. He put two 20 mm shells through us, one through the lower left side of the co-pilot's window and the other in the navigator, bombardier's section. Lt Woodside, co-pilot, produced a rag from somewhere and wiped off the cockpit windows, which were completely smoked up because the shell exploded as soon as it was inside the cockpit. Woody and I were both wearing flak vests and helmets, which saved our lives. My right arm and Woody's left arm were bleeding, and his sunglasses had been shattered. The top turret man, Sgt Lenson, was struck in the legs. The navigator and bombardier were very lucky to not be hit by the 20 mm shell that came into their section. I simply did not use evasive action soon enough, and I blame myself to this day.'



Contrailing at high altitude, this photograph of B-17F 42-29894 BN-X *Baltimore Bounce* of the 359th BS would have been very similar to Lt Henry Eich Jr's view of the aircraft from the cockpit on 11 January 1944, although this shot was actually taken on the Bremen mission of 1 December 1943. *Baltimore Bounce* is in the No 3 squadron position as seen from *WALLAROO*'s radio-room in the No 4 position. The triangle-C is just visible on the tail in the original photo. The star-in-circle on the lower-right wing is two changes behind marking regulations, but the correct insignia has been applied to the fuselage (National Archives)

If things then settled down for Eich's crew, the 303rd was facing up to 300 fighters whose attacks 'were made with outstanding vigour and pressed home to minimum range'. With no escort, the 2nd Division's B-24s recalled, and all but the 94th BG's wing of 3rd Division heading home, local Luftwaffe strength concentrated first on the 303rd and then on the 1st Division groups behind it. The group's inbound losses included three originals and other well-known aircraft. The 358th BS lost *SKY WOLF*, *War Bride* and two B-17Gs, the 359th BS *Baltimore Bounce*, the 360th BS a B-17G and the 427th BS *Bad Check*, *FLAK-WOLF* and *S-for-Sugar*. Most losses were in the low group, but the 358th's 42-5264 *YANKEE DOODIE DANDY* with Lt John Henderson's crew was also 'down there'. Trailing the formation due to early battle damage, they simply refused to fall and claimed 11 fighters damaged or destroyed in exchange for two crew killed and two wounded.

The courage of these crews provides reminders of the Irish Brigade making their charge before Marye's Heights at Fredericksburgh and the Confederate troops during Pickett's charge at Gettysburg. But armchair generals have since argued that neither assault by the Eighth should have been made. Travis has been criticised for maintaining that he heard no recall and pressing on. His troops followed just as those during the Civil War followed their leaders, but with this difference – the 'Hell's Angels' broke through the defences and reached their objective.

When Fawcett synchronised his bomb-sight over the Fw 190 factories at Oschersleben, he initiated a strike pattern that could not have been



more accurate. The high 379th did equally well. Mission accomplished, the 41st CBW wheeled about for the long trip home. In fact, some US fighters had not abandoned the bombers. The 354th did all it could. This was the mission for which Maj James Howard – already an ace with the 'Flying Tigers' in China – was awarded the Medal of Honor for single-handedly destroying six twin-engined fighters. Perhaps it was Howard in the lone P-51B who was seen by Gust on the return, diving and turning a Bf 110 into a puff of smoke. It is impossible to say for sure.

The escort couldn't help Eich's crew, who were shot down by flak. The aircraft crashed in Steinhuder Lake, near Hannover. The radioman, S/Sgt Daniel Harvey, landed there too but he drowned. The rest of the crew

Capt Fawcett's handiwork – 303rd BG strike photo of its target at Oschersleben on 11 January 1944

2Lt Henry Eich Jr's crew was shot down on 11 January 1944. They are, standing, from left to right, Eich (pilot, PoW), 2Lt William Woodside (co-pilot, PoW) and unknown (navigator), and squatting, from left to right, S/Sgt Delton Erdmann (waist gunner, PoW), S/Sgt Edmond Maggia (waist gunner, PoW), S/Sgt Harry Lenson (engineer, PoW but repatriated because of wounds), S/Sgt John Celoni (ball turret gunner, PoW), T/Sgt Daniel Harvey (radio operator, KIA) and S/Sgt Raymond Gilstrap (tail gunner, PoW but repatriated because of wounds). Not present are 2Lts James Carroll (navigator, PoW) and William Stein (bombardier, PoW)



became PoWs, although the top-turret gunner was repatriated because of his serious leg wounds. The tail gunner, S/Sgt Raymond Gilstrap, was also repatriated. His arm had been shot-off at the shoulder, but he survived the bale-out because the freezing cold had cauterised the wound. The group lost another crew, which parachuted over Holland when the 358th's *Meat Hound* threatened to go out of control after losing two engines, with another on fire. Pilot Lt Jack Watson had second thoughts and brought the bomber to a British base, where the fire was extinguished.

This exploit received much attention in the American press. Watson was one of four 303rd replacement pilots who had got themselves into big trouble flying to England in September 1943. Over New York, they had actually buzzed Yankee Stadium during the World Series! Watson enjoyed it so much that he did it again, solo, clearing the upper-deck flagpoles by 25 ft. But New York's Mayor LaGuardia was so furious he demanded a court martial for the quartet. They escaped with letters of reprimand and hefty \$75 fines. Due to wartime security, the event received almost no contemporary press coverage, but when interviewed on the radio after Oschersleben, Watson casually mentioned it and expressed the hope that LaGuardia was not still 'sore' at him. When the mayor heard this, he sent an 'all is forgiven' message which received wide media coverage. Watson continued flying missions with a new crew.

Most of the group's bombers landed at Molesworth in weather so heavy that Fawcett found this the most frightening part of the mission. Sgt Zimba recorded:

'The aeroplanes coming in had it rough. It was snowing sleet and a fog was setting in, and to top it off they lit some white flares which were dampened by the rain, and it laid down a heavy smoke screen. One aeroplane landed with a blown-out tyre, and it skidded sideways down the runway. Three aeroplanes couldn't stop. They skidded off into the mud. When the aeroplanes first came in, they came in very low about 200 ft off the ground. One started to land in a nearby wheat field. Albert said, "close your eyes, he's sure going to hit hard", but he didn't. He pulled up when he saw where he was landing. One almost hit a hay stack coming in.'

The 303rd lost ten out of 40 B-17s, and 11 crews. All told, 60 Eighth Air Force B-17s failed to return, a rate equalling the losses incurred on

the Schweinfurt missions. The 'Hell's Angels' received the Presidential Distinguished Unit Citation, as did the other 1st Division groups, and the 94th BGI of 3rd Division, for pressing on to the targets despite heavy losses. No higher honour can be bestowed on an American combat unit.

At Molesworth the main emotion was anger towards the enemy, coupled with a thirst for revenge. Many ground echelon men volunteered for combat. There was also a lot of quiet anger directed towards Travis, but in fairness the recall order was issued much later than Henry Eich recollects. It came when the bombers were far enough inside enemy territory for Travis to make the calculated, if controversial, call that going ahead was worth the risk.

Recovery was slow. On 14 January the group fielded only 18 aircraft against French V1 targets, losing *WALLAROO* to flak. A similar mission on the 21st – the group's 100th – saw it sending 29 B-17s. The next day, *HELL'S ANGELS* received a joyous send-off to America for a morale-raising factory tour with Capt Baldwin's reunited crew. It was decorated with the names of hundreds of 303rd personnel, and bore the proud boast that it was 'champ of the EFO' emblazoned on the port nose. At last the American public would learn about the 303rd.

By the month's end the group was back to full strength. On the 29th, 39 aircraft attacked Frankfurt-Main. The 427th BS's B-17G *G.I. Sheets* suffered from the combined effects of engine trouble and fighter attacks during a valiant straggler's bid to reach home by Lt James Fowler's crew. Next day, 36 of the group's B-17s made a deep penetration mission to attack an aircraft factory at Brunswick, returning without loss. The escorts were doing their job.

HELL'S ANGELS was autographed by group personnel before her return to the USA on 20 January 1944. The rear door inscription reads "Hell's Angels" BOMB GROUP – EUROPEAN THEATRE OF OPERATIONS – WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS BOMB GROUP. Behind it is unheralded, and nameless, B-17G 42-13239 VK-N of the 358th BS. Assigned on 18 November 1943, it was shot down with 1Lt Marshall Smith's crew over Schweinfurt on 24 February 1944, one of two 358th BS aircraft lost on this day. Note the circular versus block style 'C' in the triangle on both aircraft, a feature favoured by the 358th



Eighth Air Force strength built steadily in February 1944 as Doolittle waited for a week of good weather to deliver a knockout blow against the German aircraft industry. The 303rd flew six missions against targets in Germany and France between 3 and 11 February – Wilhelmshaven on the 3rd, Frankfurt-Main on the 4th, Orleans on the 5th, Dijon on the 6th and Frankfurt-Main again on the 8th, and yet again on the 11th. One aircraft was lost on the Wilhelmshaven raid. The B-17G of Capt Gerald White's 358th crew on their first mission rolled on its back after leaving the target and nosed straight into the North Sea, cause unknown. The flak was light, and while one airman described a veritable 'merry-go-round' of fighters over the target, they were Allied ones showing how much the air war was changing. Maj Snyder called it 'one of the roughest trips that I have ever been on, but it was due to the clouds, contrails and a heavy snowstorm, not the Germans'.

There was another loss over Dijon. *The Padded Cell*, a 358th B-17G, caught fire in the cockpit from unknown causes and crashed near Paris with ten parachutes seen. Only the co-pilot of 1Lt Julius Bass's crew was killed. Stray 0.50-cal bullets from a nearby 379th aircraft also killed the co-pilot of a 360th B-17G. The attack against the group's target airfield was frustrated by cloud cover.

On 11 February the 358th's B-17G *Special Delivery*, also known as *Big-a-Bird*, lost two engines over Frankfurt-Main and also suffered fuel and major mechanical problems. It limped back to England unmolested thanks to the escorts, but lost all engines while attempting an emergency landing. It crashed among a stand of oaks, killing the engineer and injuring all other crewmembers, but the pilots so badly that they were repatriated – both men were later lost in action.

No missions were ordered between 12 and 19 February. Clearly, something was up. When the 303rd crews sat down for briefing on the morning of the 20th and the mission-map curtain was pulled aside, they saw how they would play their part in the opening salvo of Operation *Argument*. This was to be USSTAF's attempt at a killing blow against the Luftwaffe in the air and against vital aircraft factories. For the first time the Eighth would be dispatching over 1000 heavy bombers, escorted by no less than 835 fighters.

The 303rd had two missions to fly. Its 'A' group was to attack a Junkers bomber factory in Leipzig while the 'B' group raided a Junkers assembly plant at Bernburg. The bomber crews worried about fighter opposition, but the Luftwaffe did not rise in force to intercept them. Whether this was due to exhaustion or total surprise is unclear, although signs of stress had been evident for some time. The Germans could no longer match the Americans blow-for-blow, and now had to pick their battles.

The 303rd 'A' group was led by Maj Richard Cole, the 359th CO, and 1Lt Off Thomas Quinn's crew in B-17G *Ole George*. The group bombardier, 1st Charles McClain, bombed so well that he was awarded the DFC. 1st Vern Moncur's crew was flying B-17G *THUNDER BIRD* in the same formation. Afterwards, he wrote:

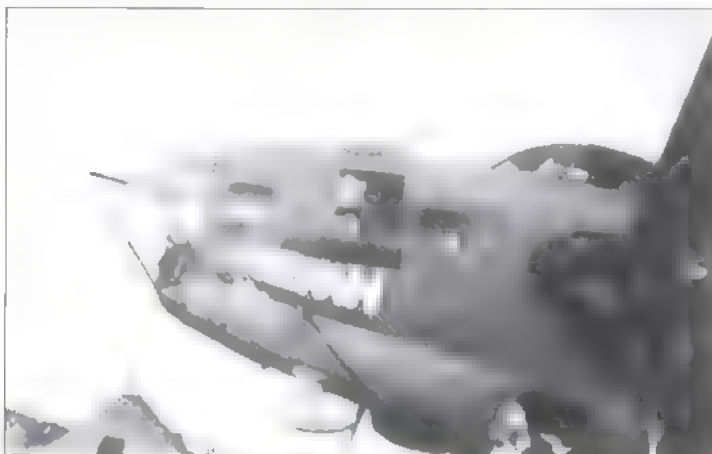
'This was the longest trip to date. We were in the air nearly nine hours, and were really tired when we finally got home. This trip could have been a very rough one, but we had excellent fighter cover – and so the few passes the Krauts made at us didn't hurt us too much.'

The 'B' group failed to locate their primary or secondary targets and bombed one of opportunity. No crews in either formation were lost, but one 360th B-17F crash-landed in an English field due to engine trouble, neatly blocking the narrow country road where it came to rest. It was written off. The next mission, in which the group bombed a German aerodrome at Diepholz as a target of opportunity on 21 February, meant 'a pretty quiet day', according to Maj Herbert Kalhofer, the 'B' group leader. There were no losses. The same cannot be said for the next.

If Oschersleben looms large in 303rd history, Aschersleben also has a place. The group went to attack a Junkers components factory but the mission began badly. During assembly, the 358th's B-17G *HELL'S ANGELS II* was cut in two at the rear door in a collision with a 384th BG's B-17 from nearby Grafton Underwood. Only the right waist gunner on 1Lt John Stuermer's crew got out alive. During the trip fighters penetrated gaps in the escort cover over Nijmegen, north of the Ruhr, and between Münster and Paderborn. Inbound over Holland, they shot down a 360th B-17G (1Lt Charles Crook's crew). All survived and most evaded capture. Lost over Garzweyer, Germany, was the 358th's *MIZPAH*, an older B-17F in which half of 2Lt John Moffat's crew died.

The 427th BS's venerable *Luscious Lady* nearly joining *MIZPAH*. Fighters attacked from 'six o'clock', where T/Sgt William T. L. Werner manned its tail-guns. He got one, but was badly wounded by 20 mm shrapnel. Werner stayed put even after flak wounded him again, and nobody knew of his injuries because the tail-guns kept firing. Only when it was safe did he crawl forward and collapse near the tail wheel well. All of 1Lt Shirley Estes' crew felt Werner had single-handedly saved them. He was awarded the DSC, becoming the third member of the 'Hell's Angel' to receive the nation's second highest award for courage under fire.

Not so fortunate was the 360th BS's B-17F *Pluto's Avenger*, named to remember long-gone *OOOLD SOLDIER*. It fell victim to fighters on the return journey, crashing near Antwerp. Five of 2Lt John Morrin's crew died with it, and a sixth succumbed during captivity. The 360th BS's well-known B-17F 42-29951 *SATAN'S WORKSHOP* ditched in the Channel from cumulative damage, and 1Lt George Underwood's entire crew perished. Three bodies were recovered and buried. Bombing results offered some consolation. Maj Kirk Mitchell - the 358th's CO and a fine



B-17F 42-5052 VK-E *MIZPAH* of the 358th BS was lost during the 'Big Week' mission to Aschersleben on 22 February 1944



mission leader – headed 'A' wing of the 41st CBW in the 303rd's 'A' group. He thought that 'we really smashed the place today.'

On 24 February, the 303rd returned to a target it had attacked twice before – the Kugelfischer ball bearing works at Schweinfurt. After all its previous success over the city, two aircraft were lost from the 358th BS in the 303rd high group. A daring Bf 110 dived out of the sun and destroyed 1 Lt Marshall Smith's B-17G with either a rocket or gunfire – the records are not clear. Only the crew's navigator and tail-gunner survived. Lt John Henderson's B-17G fell to flak. After all the original crew survivors had been through – over Bremen on 20 December 1943, when Forrest Vosler was awarded the Medal of Honor, and above Oschersleben, where they put up one of the greatest fights in Eighth history – there was simply no recovery from a hit that blew the No 1 engine right off the wing. At least all on board survived the war as POWs.

The returning crews had high praise for the escort. The group's bombing was not as good as before, partially due to mechanical malfunctions in the high group's lead aircraft, but Capt Mel Schulstad still felt it was 'a well-planned and well-executed mission.'

The final 303rd missions of Operation *Argument* were flown on 25 March – a full group effort against a Stuttgart ball bearing plant, and a composite 303rd/384th strike against Messerschmitt facilities in Augsburg. Both Maj Cole, who led the former, and Maj Schumake, who led the latter, felt that the visual bombing had been excellent, despite flak over both targets which caused damage to 23 out of 25 aircraft, and left the group with

B-17F 42-29931 PU-L SATAN'S WORKSHOP II, also known as *Devil's Workshop*, of the 360th BS was also lost in the Channel returning from the mission to Aschersleben on 22 February 1944

six wounded crewmen. So ended the 303rd's participation in 'Big Week', as Operation *Argument* came to be known. It is beyond this book's scope to analyse its results, except to say that both the Eighth and Fifteenth air forces' sustained and overwhelming attacks ensured that the Luftwaffe would never again threaten the daylight bombing campaign.

The Eighth stood down on 26/27 February, and on the 28th the 303rd sent 23 aircraft to attack V1 targets near the Pas-de-Calais. Flak was encountered the whole time the group was in enemy airspace, and bombing was by squadron at 14,000 ft. Just after the second bomb run flak blew the right wing off Lt Noel Shoup's 359th B-17F. As it spiralled down, the flak-weakened nose broke off, ejecting the bombardier and navigator and allowing them to parachute to safety. A waist gunner managed to throw himself through his open waist window – he too survived. The rest of the crew faced the horrifying end met by so many Eighth Air Force airmen – trapped by centrifugal force as their doomed aircraft spiralled towards the ground. They were all killed in the crash.

On 2 March the 303rd put up three group formations in 31 aircraft, an all-303rd 'A' group, and 'B' and 'C' composite groups with the 384th and the 379th. The first two formations bombed the primary target, a ball bearing plant in Frankfurt-Main, while the 'C' group attacked a nearby marshalling yard. *Old Hickory*, a 358th BS B-17G piloted by 21st Damon Elder in the 'B' group, apparently fell to a single pass by two Bf 109s. It dropped out of formation with the No 1 engine smoking and was abandoned over Belgium. Eight of the crew went into captivity and two died. Underlining the way the group had now become inured to losses, the word used by most aircrew to describe the mission was 'routine.'

Doolittle was now ready to strike a target that was anything but routine – Berlin. The weather failed to co-operate on 3 March, resulting in the group's recall from an attack on a ball bearing factory at Erkner, a Berlin suburb synonymous with the city itself. The next day only 30 3rd Division B-17s managed to bomb 'Big B' through very heavy cloud-cover. Meantime, the 303rd bombed targets of opportunity in 'happy valley' near Bonn.

The big day came on the 6th when Doolittle dispatched everything he had – 730 heavy bombers from all three bomb divisions, plus 801 fighters, including 100 P-51s. It represented the high-water mark of the Luftwaffe's *Reichsverteidigung* (Reich Defence) forces, for a record 69 Eighth Air Force bombers failed to return, together with 11 fighters. But the Germans could ill afford the 80 to 90 aircraft they in turn lost. They could not replace the veteran pilots killed in this battle, nor those who would continue to die in the relentless, grinding war of attrition the daylight campaign had now become.

From now on flak would be the most feared enemy for 303rd crews. Lt Vern Moncur's journal entry for 6 March 1944 makes the point well:

'The flak over Berlin was the most accurate and most heavy flak we ever got into. It seemed almost thick enough to drop your wheels and taxi around on it. The Krauts were practically able to name the engine they were shooting at. On our way back from the target, we had a few passes made at our group, but the P-51 fighter escort very quickly took care of these Me 109s. We put up 27 ships, and every one of them went across the target, and every one of them came back.'

MASS BOMBING TO VICTORY

It's getting to be like a habit', Capt Irl Baldwin of the 358th BS had written on 28 March 1943. 'We go over, drop our bombs, and fly back. Our bombing is improving all the time.'

It is ironic that a comment by the first 303rd pilot to complete a 25-mission tour should describe so well the very different war fought a year afterwards by his successors. Yet he captures the essence of the bomber crew's experience between March 1944 and 25 April 1945, the date when the 303rd flew its last mission. It had become a matter of 'habit' or 'routine', but one in which the risk of sudden death was always there to jar the survivors back to reality.

There were, however, huge differences between the group's early operations and those flown after the watershed Berlin raid on 6 March 1944. Perhaps the greatest was the pace. In the 14 months from its first mission to that day, the 303rd completed 118 raids. In the last 13 months it flew twice that number. The 303rd's war mission total was 364, higher than any other Eighth Air Force B-17 group.

This was the time when the Eighth pounded German industry, turning war-industries into cottage-industries, and forcing factories into caves and bunkers, where slave labour continued to manufacture the Reich's weapons. The Eighth's chief strategic contribution during this time was the successful 'oil campaign' which literally caused Germany to run out of fuel.

Mission tempo placed not only individual aircrew and aircraft under stress, but also the whole Eighth Air Force. Doolittle was forced to make some highly unpopular decisions. On 1 April crews who had not completed a 25-mission tour were now required to fly 30. After D-Day, the requirement was lifted again to 35, although there was a sliding-scale which reduced this if a man had flown more than 15 missions by 15 June. The crew size was also cut from ten to nine with the elimination of a waist gunner on 1 April, and then to eight when both waist gunners became redundant in 1945. Enlisted 'toggliers' eventually replaced bombardiers in all but lead aircraft.

Even with the new numbers, many crewmen completed their tours with amazing speed. It took 67 days between May and July 1944 for three members of Lt William Davis's 358th crew to complete their 32 missions. Many crewmen finished 35 missions in less than 100 days. 1Lt Harry Gobrecht's 358th crew completed their 35 in 106 days, starting on 26 November 1944 and ending on 11 March 1945. Yet it had taken Lt Robert Hollar's crew over six months to fly their 25-missions between August 1943 and February 1944 – a long time even considering that their later missions were delayed by their lead crew duties.

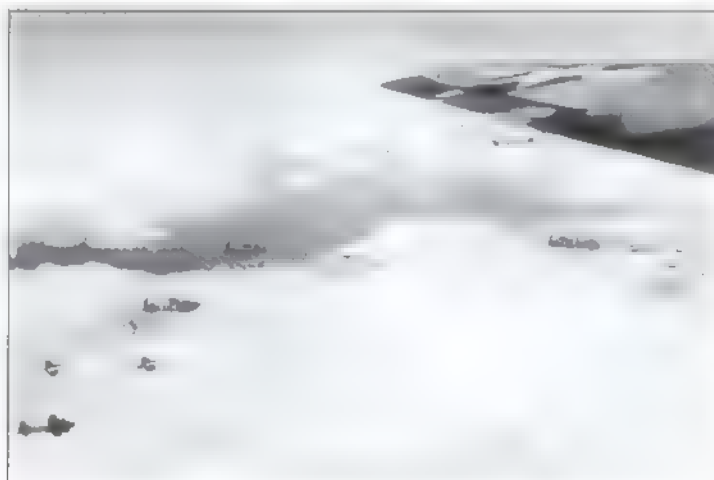
Small wonder that long-service veterans, already reluctant to make new friends because of earlier losses, had neither inclination nor time to get to

Some things didn't change – 1Lt Harry Gobrecht stands outside 'Sad Shack', 'home' for his crew's officers and those of another crew, in January 1945. It is clear housing conditions didn't change for officers and enlisted men from the time Sgt Francis Hinds' enlisted crew occupied their quarters in 1942 (see the photograph on page 28)



know the busy newcomers. A war that was necessarily impersonal, as casualties mounted in 1943, became increasingly so in 1944-45. The stepped-up pace also made the aircraft more anonymous. Of 134 group B-17's, 99 (74 per cent) bore names and/or artwork. Of its 282 B-17Gs, only 137 (48 per cent) had names, and by March the 303rd's war was quickly becoming an all B-17G affair. *THE 8 BALL Mk II* was transferred to the 1st Division on 7 April 1944, later to return to the 'States. When *THE DUCHESS* went back to the USA on the 8th, it was the oldest serving B-17F in the European theatre. Little more than a month later, on 12 May, the 303rd flew its last B-17F mission when *Mrs Satan (The Queen of Hell)* returned from Merseburg with Lt Donald Johnston's crew.

A strong team is seen in this portrait of 303rd aircraft taken after aluminium finished B-17Gs began to arrive in the group's ranks in March 1944. The aircraft from which the photo is taken is certainly a group original, given the telltale Medium Green 42 paint on the wing trailing-edge and aileron (Mel Schulstad)



The group's formations took on an entirely new look in March with the elimination of external paint on new B-17Gs. The skies began to fill with a mixture of camouflaged and natural metal aircraft, and by war's end there were only a few incredibly worn-looking Olive Drab G-models remaining in 303rd formations. Examples were the 359th's 42-38050 *THUNDER BIRD* with 112 missions and the 427th's 42-39885 *Sweet ROSE O'GRADY* with 134. High-mission aluminium veterans like 43-37590 *NEVA The Silver Lady*, with 127 missions, looked less tired although they were no less worn. Gaudy artwork like that on early-1943

B-17F "TWO BEAUTS" was rare indeed. The groundcrews were too busy and the aircrews too focused on missions and survival – in many different aircraft – to worry about names or other artwork. Surveying this scene, it is tempting to recall the American Civil War when extravagant uniforms worn by many Army of the Potomac regiments in 1861-62 gave way to dull blue uniformity in the 1864-65 siege lines around Petersburg. The late stages of any long conflict always have a grimness about them, reflecting an accumulation of grief.



B-17G 43-37950 VK-Q NEVA *The Silver Lady* of the 358th BS is seen at 'bombs-away', amid abundant flak, through the Plexiglas waist-window of the aircraft off its left wing. Of interest is the fact that the waist gun has been removed from the latter aircraft from which the photo was taken. The dark tone of NEVA's wing-tip is believed to be metal contrast, as aluminium finish 303rd aircraft did not have painted wing tips (Harry Gobrecht)

The group suffered relatively few losses during the balance of March. The 360th's B-17G *Doolittle's Destroyers* fell to flak near Erkner on the 8th while on a mission against the VKF ball bearing works, with the entire crew becoming PoWs. Just how badly the Luftwaffe had been wounded was clear from the observations of some crews who saw fighters parked on airfields with no apparent attempt to take off. Those seen in the air were in combat with the escorting fighters. As Maj Mitchell stated afterwards, 'I know it's hard to believe, but we had absolutely no opposition at all'. The same thing happened on another Berlin mission the next day.



The war weary tail on NEVA *The Silver Lady* is apparent in this photograph, taken after the image see above. The paint has been badly worn away to reveal the aircraft's serial number in black numerals. This was located below the original small black triangle-C before the post-1944 red triangle-C border was applied, and the serial number repainted in yellow on the bottom red triangle bar. The individual standing alongside the bomber's Cheyenne tail turret is Sgt Phil Buske. Lt Gobrecht's tall gunner (Harry Gobrecht)

After a string of scrubbed missions, the group's next raid was flown on the 16th. An aircraft factory and repair facility at Oberpfaffenhofen, near Munich, was the primary target, but cloud caused the group to make a PFF raid on Augsburg. A few fighters were encountered but their pilots, though 'cager', were clearly inexperienced – no B-17s were lost.

Two days later the group returned to attack that primary target in a mission notable chiefly for the 25-mission 'beat-up' of the control tower by Lt Willard 'Bill' Bergeron, a veteran of the first and second Schweinfurt raids. He was leading the mission with Col William Travis, Gen Travis's brother. Bergeron later recounted, 'In the landing pattern, I called my number two man and said, "Take over, I am going to buzz the tower", Col Travis replied, "You can't do that", I said, "I know it." I think some boys lost some money on bets, because I gave it two passes and then followed the last man in.' After leave in the US, Bergeron returned to the group to become the 358th BS's operations officer.

Equally uneventful were the next three missions, against French V1 targets at Wizernes on the 19th, Frankfurt-Main on the 20th and Berlin on the 22nd. The next, in which the group bombed Hamm as a target of opportunity on the 23rd, would also have been uneventful but for an incident involving B-17G *Betty Jane* of the 427th BS, flown by Lt Raymond Hoffman's 358th BS crew. *Betty Jane* made it home, but without tail gunner Sgt James Williams. His body was recovered in Hamm the next

Lt Willard 'Bill' Bergeron and his 360th BS crew standing before B-17F 42-5054 PU-1 *Belle of San Joaquin* of the 360th BS on 21 December 1943. Lt Bergeron is in the back row, far left



day, flak having blown the tail gunner's compartment completely off the aircraft. Repaired, *Betty Jane* soldiered on.

Flak accounted for B-17G *Tennessee Hillbilly* of the 427th BS on 26 March during its return trip to Wizernes. Nine of the crew became PoWs but one escaped. There was another mission on the 27th, to an aerodrome at Chartres. This one was completely uneventful, except that the 359th's B-17F 41-24605 *Knockout Dropper*, flown by 1Lt John Savage's crew, became the first Eighth bomber to complete 75 missions. The increasing operational tempo could clearly be seen in *Knockout Dropper's* mission list. It had taken a year to finish 50 missions, but 41-24605 logged its last 25 in a little over four months.

Less obvious was what M/Sgt Buford Pafford's groundcrew had done to keep the veteran bomber in the air – installed 16 new engines, ten superchargers, three new stabilisers, four main wheel tyres, 48 oil coolers, five sets of brakes, one generator, one oil pump, two glycol pumps, one gas tank, four tail wheel tyres, a complete set of radio equipment and nearly 2500 spark plugs. Its combat days over, *Knockout Dropper* joined *HELL'S ANGELS* in America on its own war bond tour to spread the word about what the 303rd was doing.

The target on 28 March was another Luftwaffe aerodrome near Dijon. Schulstad led, and said afterwards, 'It was the most perfect mission I've ever been on. Absolutely no opposition and bombing couldn't have been better.' Sgt Charles Robb, a tail gunner, observed, 'When we were 150 miles away from the target on the way home, I could still see smoke coming up from the field.' Another mission, against a *Wehrmacht* barracks – 14 miles south-west of Bremen on the 29th, was also a resounding success.

There were three scrubbed missions between 1 and 8 April, and then the pace of operations finally caught up with one of the group's aircraft. On the 9th there was nothing to distinguish the 427th BS's *The Spirit of Flak Wolf* from its 39 sister B-17s when it roared down the runway with 1Lt John McGarry's crew. Like the other aircraft, the Fortress had a full fuel-load and ten 500-lb M64 GP bombs. The group was off on an 11-hour mission against the Focke-Wulf factory at Marienburg, deep in eastern Germany.

The other ships left without incident, but *The Spirit of Flak Wolf* could not gain sufficient altitude and it hit a tree, severing part of the tail. Still unable to gain altitude, and now hard to control, the B-17 hit another tree and crashed about two miles from the end of the runway. In the ensuing fire six crewmembers, including McGarry, were killed. The four survivors escaped with burns and severe contusions. Engine failure on take-off was the probable cause. Still, the mission was considered a success. No others were killed, and Travis later commented that 'our bomb run was perfect'.

There were two more missions without major incident – one to Brussels/Evere aircraft factory and aerodrome and another against an Fw 190 assembly plant in Sorau, Germany. Then the group returned to Schweinfurt for a fourth attack on 13 April, running into fierce fighter opposition approaching the city, which cost it a 358th B-17G. Enemy fighters managed to penetrate the escorts. In the 360th's B-17G 42-97546 *Idaliza*, 20 mm shells destroyed the Plexiglas nose. Its bombardier, 2Lt Thomas F Dello Buono of 2Lt Nelson O'Beirne's crew, was blown against the after bulkhead by a 20 mm fragment which pierced his flak jacket and lodged in his chest near his heart. His left thumb was also severed. Dello



The shattered remains of the 427th BS's B-17G 42-31606 GN-U *The Spirit of Flak Wolf* litter a field two miles from the end of the runway at Molesworth on 9 April 1944. Remarkably, four crewmen escaped alive from the tail section. Note the tail remains to the right of the officer at far left and the relatively undamaged propeller blade on the engine at right. This suggests that the engine may have stopped running during the fatal take-off

Buono returned to his guns and defended *Idaliza* with the chin turret, later dropping a highly accurate pattern of bombs. He was awarded the DSC, becoming the fourth, and final 303rd, recipient.

In the 12 days between 18 and 30 April, the 303rd flew an amazing 11 missions, cramming morning and afternoon operations into the schedule on the 19th and the 27th. It lost *The Road Back*, a 360th B-17G, to flak over Oranienburg on the 18th, with its crew becoming PoWs. The raids on Oberpfaffenhofen and Landsberg aerodromes near Munich on 24 April were especially costly. Between 75 and 200 Luftwaffe fighters massed against the 1st Division and engaged both escorts and bombers from Augsburg to and from the Munich target area. Twenty B-17s were lost, 13 fleeing to nearby Switzerland, and, interment, when battle damage made it obvious that they would not reach England.

Three of these came from the 358th BS. One was B-17G 42-97311 *Shoo Shoo Baby*, flown by the same crew which had lost its tail gunner over Hamm in *Betty Jane*. Of the other two, one was flown by 2Lt Paul Stewart's crew, and they fell far short of Switzerland. Their B-17 was hit by flak over the target area and could not remain in formation, so Stewart headed for the neutral haven. A head-on fighter attack killed the radioman with 20 mm cannon fire, which also started a fire in the bomb-bay. The rear crewmen tried to contact those forward but received no reply. The

The shattered Plexiglas nose of B-17G 42-97548 PU-E *Idaliza* of the 360th BE after the Schweinfurt mission of 13 April 1944. Bombardier 2Lt Thomas F Dello Buono was awarded the DSC for continuing to defend the aircraft against fighter attacks, and for accurately bombing the target while sitting in this destroyed location with a large 20 mm shell fragment lodged near his heart and a thumb severed by gunfire



waist gunners jumped out of their windows, while the tail gunner took advantage of the escape hatch under the right horizontal stabiliser. They were captured as soon as they landed.

Before jumping, they asked the ball-turret gunner if he was okay. 'Hurry up and jump', he answered as he buckled on a spare parachute. His original had opened and spilled in the waist area. That was the last they saw of him as the aircraft banked left and went into a tight spiral. The seven remaining crew were found dead in the wreckage of their B-17. United in war and death, they remain together as a crew in a common grave with a single headstone at the Zachary Taylor National Cemetery in Louisville, Kentucky. This mission also saw the group lead navigator from the 358th killed in B-17G *Clower Leaf*, also known as *Little Princess*. Afterwards, Maj Snyder said of this nine-hour effort, 'It was a long haul, and I only hope it was worth it'.

The 25 April mission against an aerodrome near Metz was uneventful, except for the write-off of the 427th BS's B-17G *V-Packet* – the name referred to the packets containing government-issue prophylactics – when its pilot had to crash-land the flak-damaged aircraft in England. Both missions on the 27th against French targets went well, and then the group returned to Berlin on the 29th. Over the city, the 427th's *Max* straggled for unknown reasons and was blown up by fighters, with only two survivors. It would be the last 303rd B-17F lost in combat. *Spirit of Winette* received a direct flak hit in Nos 3 and 4 fuel tanks, fell out of formation and started haemorrhaging fuel. Its crew tried to reach Sweden, but the aircraft crashed in the Baltic after additional flak and fighter damage. Five crewmen were killed, but four became PoWs and one escaped. There were no losses on the 30 April mission against a French aerodrome.

May 1944 saw the formal inauguration of the 'oil campaign' by USSTAF as Spaatz finally found the Reich's strategic jugular and began the process of cutting it. Countless Eighth Air Force bombers would be lost to flak during attacks on synthetic oil refineries all over Germany, while the Fifteenth's B-17s and B-24s attacked the Rumanian oil city of Ploesti from high altitude time and again. Perhaps the most feared Eighth oil target was Merseburg, just west of Leipzig, whose vast synthetic oil refinery and chemical works in nearby Leuna placed it high on the target list. Over 500 flak guns defended it.

It was already too late for Spaatz and other daylight bombing advocates to show that strategic bombing alone could win the war. D-Day was just a month away, and the Eighth's resources were deployed not just against oil, French V1 targets, aircraft factories and aerodromes, but also against transportation targets as part of Allied invasion preparations. The group flew 21 missions in May, with only five aircraft lost. The first was on the 11th, during a group mission against marshalling yards at Volkingen, near Saarbrücken.

This aircraft was the 360th's *BOW-UR-NECK Stevens*, the B-17G named after Col Stevens' briefing exhortation. Piloted by Capt John Long, it fell out of formation after flak set the No 1 engine on fire. Displaying the spirit for which his CO was famous, Long forced the aircraft back into formation for the bomb run. Just after bombs away, flak ripped away the No 3 engine, and in a sickening sequence, the B-17 flipped over on its back, went down, pulled out and almost immediately

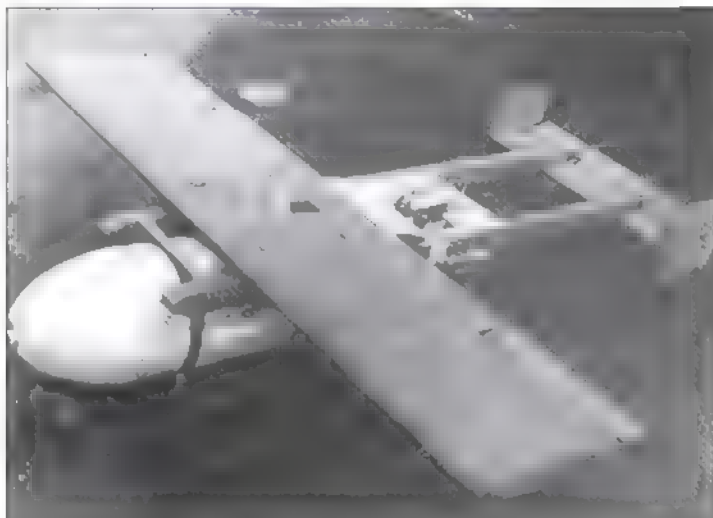
went into another dive. Four parachutes were seen, but then the aircraft disappeared into haze. Long and the other five members of his crew were killed. The 360th's B-17G *Sweet Melody* was also badly torn by flak, but its pilot, 1Lt Anthony Cecchini, got the bomber back to England after a perilous flight at tree-top height on three engines. Four crewmen were wounded by low-level flak during *Sweet Melody*'s return.

The 303rd's first trip to Merseburg on 12 May – swansong mission for its B-17Es – proved easy. A PFF mission to Berlin on the 24th cost the 358th BS a B-17 to unknown causes, with nine crew killed and one captured. On the 28th the 303rd participated in a unique 41st CBW raid against Cologne using a primitive semi-guided stand-off weapon known as the GB-1 Glide Bomb. Configured like a tiny P-38 whose main fuselage was a 2000-lb bomb, two were carried by each B-17 on under-wing shackles between inboard engines and fuselage. They were intended as a way for bombers to avoid heavy flak defences, but they proved too difficult to launch – the group formation had to dive and achieve a speed of nearly 200 kts before release – and they were highly inaccurate. Although some GB-1s hit Cologne, this mission represented their only combat use.

On a second mission that day, the group sent 16 aircraft to the Leipzig area, but cloud forced it to bomb a power station at Rotha, 12 miles south of the city. Fighters rose in force and accounted for 32 B-17s, but the 303rd's only loss was a 358th aircraft which fell to flak, killing seven crewmembers and sending three into captivity. However, the 360th's *Flak Hack* survived a flak hit just as miraculously as "FLAK-WOLF" had during the previous October's Münster mission. This shell also passed between pilot and co-pilot while the aircraft was in a formation turn. It too failed to explode, but instead of leaving through the pilots' roof, as in "FLAK-WOLF's" case, it came out through the port fuselage below the top-turret, barely missing the gunner. Although everyone in 1Lt Edgar Miller's crew was shaken, they all came home, and the B-17 flew again.

On 29 and 30 May the group attacked aircraft factories in Posen, Poland and Halberstadt. En route to the target on the 30th, the 359th's *Pistol Packin' Mama* suffered engine trouble and dropped behind the formation. It was picked off by Bf 109s, with four killed and five becoming PoWs.

The group's losses on these two days underlined another risk faced by Eighth Air Force bomber crews. 2Lt Alvin Determan, pilot of the lost 358th aircraft, was told by the German officer who captured him, 'If you were English, I would have shot you'. Many Germans reserved special hatred for RAF bomber crews because of their area bombing tactics, but others weren't so discriminating. *Pistol Packin' Mama*'s pilot, 2Lt Douglas van Weelden, was certain that four of his crew were murdered. In fact,



A practice GB-1 glide bomb of the kind tested, with a notable lack of success, by the 41st CBW and the 303rd on the Cologne mission of May 1944. Allied weapons technology lagged far behind that of the Germans in the development and use of such weapons (National Archives)



Flak damage to B-17G 42-97329 PU-H
Flak Hack of the 360th BS on the 28 May 1944 mission to Rotha, near Leipzig. Lt Col Lyle convincingly shows the size of the hole. The aircraft was shot down by fighters over Magdeburg on 28 September 1944

there is evidence to support the belief that up to 18 303rd airmen captured between 30 December 1943 and 17 April 1945 were murdered. On the other side of the coin, some German soldiers were instrumental in saving allied airmen from being lynched by enraged civilians. Sgt William Simpkins of Lt John Henderson's crew believes he owes his life to a German guard who raced his prisoners through the Frankfurt-Main *bahnhof* and cheated the lynch mob which wanted to add them to the Allied airmen already hanging from the roof girders.

There were no losses occurred on the 31 May mission to Gilze-Rijen aerodrome, which was completely different from the group's close encounter with the Luftwaffe on 19 August 1943. This time not a single enemy fighter was seen. By the end of May the 1st Division had discarded the three-group, 60-ship combat box formation devised by LeMay to maximise B-17 defence against fighters. Aircraft now deployed in squadron formations, which comprised a horizontally-oriented wedge of 13 aircraft at staggered altitudes – a 'high' flight of four aircraft, and 'lead', 'low' and 'low-low' flights of three aircraft each. Groups dispatched three squadron formations – lead, low and high squadron – for a total group formation of 39 aircraft.

On maximum efforts, the 41st CBW formed a composite group comprising one squadron formation each from the 303rd, 379th and the 384th. The purpose was to spread the formation to present a less concentrated target for flak, and to minimise the risk of bombs striking lower formation aircraft.

June 1944 saw the 303rd flying its first 'tactical missions' before D-Day against marshalling yards and gun emplacements in Normandy and Pas-de-Calais to confuse the Germans about Allied invasion intentions. On 6 June Stevens told the men at briefing, 'This is D-Day. This is the day we have all been waiting for. Make 'em know it'. The group flew an early morning mission against a bridge at Caen. Walter Cronkite was in the formation for his second mission with the group, but only 16 of 34 bombers made PFF drops due to cloud, and results were unobserved. A second mission against the same target was recalled due to cloud and the lack of a PFF ship in the formation. The group's effort to fly a third mission, against a bridge at Conde-sur-Noireau, was also frustrated by bad weather, although a target of opportunity was bombed visually.

The 303rd continued to fly missions against French targets until 19 June, losing the 358th's *Bam Bam* when it went out of control shortly after take-off on the 10th. Six crewmen managed to bale out, but four others were killed. Two days later a 360th aircraft became completely engulfed in flames from flak hits, then broke in two near the bomb-bay. Only the tail-gunner escaped. On the 18th the group resumed the 'oil campaign' with a mission against petroleum installations in Hamburg, followed the next day by two missions against French V1 targets.

The group returned to Hamburg on 20 June on a mission which resulted in the oil installations attacked two days before erupting in huge explosions, sending flames and smoke up to 10,000 ft. One 360th B-17 was lost to unknown causes, the pilot managing a dead-stick landing, and the whole crew became PoWs. But the group had played a highly successful part in a remarkable demonstration of the Eighth's power when over 1500 heavy bombers attacked 12 separate oil targets with good to excellent results against every one.

The last ten days of June, though, were tough. The 303rd lost two aircraft over Berlin on the 21st, two more on twin missions to France the next day, one over Bremen on the 24th, another over a French aerodrome on the 28th and a final one near Leipzig on the 29th. All were caused by flak, and some represented the horrific fate every crewman dreaded. The 360th's *Old Glory* went down in flames on the 22nd with just one survivor. *My Yorkshire Dream* of the 427th received a direct hit in the waist just before 'bombs away' on the 29th. It broke in two, fell straight down and the larger part blew up at lower altitude. Although no parachutes were seen, the ball-turret gunner somehow survived.

July 1944 passed in the same way, although with far fewer losses. The group flew 20 missions that month, logging its 200th on the 9th and losing only four aircraft. On the 13th a 360th B-17 damaged by flak over Munich managed to crash-land in Switzerland. On the 19th the 358th's *Little Princess* succumbed to fighters near Munich, but P-51s intervened allowing six of the crew to parachute to safety. On 23 July, following an attack on a French aerodrome at Creil, two B-17s got lost because of ten-tenths under-cast. One from the 359th ran out of fuel on the return, ditching in the Channel, but the crew was rescued. The 358th's *Paper Dollie* ran out of fuel over England and two crewmembers were killed baling out.

The two July highlights were the Eighth's attacks on the 24th and 25th in support of Operation *Cobra*, the US 1st Army's breakout from Normandy. The group participated in these 1500+ heavy bomber efforts and, while its bombing results were poor, it was not an Eighth unit which hit American troops by mistake.

In August the Eighth adopted new high visibility group markings for its bombers. The 303rd's triangle-Cs now had a large red border around them and yellow 1-2-3-4 numbers at the apex in ascending numerical order, indicating which squadron an aircraft belonged to. The number '1' stood for the 358th BS and so on. Aircraft serial numbers were painted in yellow over the bottom red bar.

By this time it must have seemed to many 'Hell's Angels' as if the hardest fighting had shifted to the ground. The breakout from Normandy was developing dramatically, with the Wehrmacht in full retreat. The group lost no aircraft during the 14 missions flown in the

first two weeks of August, and suffered only two men wounded. On the 4 August Peenemünde mission the group's gunners shot down a Bf 110 which was attacking the 359th BS's *Queen of Hearts*. The only sights of note were a few Me 163 rocket-powered interceptors glimpsed in the distance near Hamburg on the 6th, but they did not approach the 303rd thanks to the presence of its escort.

The 15 August raid on an airfield near Wiesbaden initially suggested no special risks. Thirty-nine B-17s took off, flying as the 'B' formation of the 41st CBW, and 37 dropped a total of 147 1000-lb M43 and 146 500-lb M17 incendiary bombs. They hit one hangar and just missed another, while the entire airfield area was blanketed by the incendiaries. Eleven aircraft suffered flak damage but none went down. At 1148 hrs during the return journey, when the group was about 45 miles from the target, the 303rd reached a turning point in its history. The fighter escort, which had been effective up to this point, was nowhere in sight when the formation was attacked by 20 to 25 German aircraft. These were not regular fighters.

In 1944, as the day-in, day-out aerial battles showed the Luftwaffe to be losing control of the air, the Germans developed *Sturmgruppen*, special bomber-killer units with heavily-armed and armoured Fw 190s, escorted by Bf 109s. They were specifically designed to destroy individual bomber formations in lightning attacks when no escorts were present. The hope was that bomber losses would be so devastating that the Eighth would be deterred from launching missions.

In a scene made famous by *Fortresses Under Fire*, the Keith Ferris mural in the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, DC, the 'Hell's Angels' now received this treatment in an intense, undetected attack high out of the sun by JG 300. They struck the low 358th BS formation of 13 aircraft, and in a matter of seconds nine were shot down – seven from the 358th BS and two from the 427th. The 358th lost three unnamed B-17Gs, as well as 43-37838 *FEARLESS FOSDICK*, *My Blonde Baby*, *Helen Heaven* and *Bad Penny*. The 427th lost *Tiny Angel* and *Jigger Rooche*, also known as *Kraut Killer*.

The mission certainly represented a devastating and demoralising defeat, resulting in 23 men dead and 48 captured. Another dead man and two wounded crew-members were in the damaged aircraft which returned. But it hardly deterred the group from its mission. Three days later the 303rd put up another 39 aircraft and crews to attack railway bridges in Belgium. It was a telling demonstration not only of the Eighth's recuperative powers, but also of the calibre of men in the group's B-17s.

Flying as a new co-pilot on his first mission in *The Floose* of the 358th BS was 21st Werner G. Göring, nephew of *Reichsmarschall* Herman Göring himself! If the Germans thought they could intimidate their American opponents they were mistaken. Werner Göring would go on to complete a distinguished combat career, heading a lead group and finishing the war with 49 mission credited to him.

The 303rd's war resumed its brutal pattern of occasional, but terrible, losses to flak. The guns at Merseburg drew blood on 24 August, especially in the lead 427th ship flown by Capt Robert Sheets. Lead navigator 1Lt John Shupe was helping bombardier 1st F E Umphress locate the aiming point when Umphress saw blood from Shupe's arm spurt across the nose. Umphress continued the bomb run with Shupe's help, and the



2Lt Warner G Göring (back row, far right) could hardly look less like his infamous uncle, Reichsmarschall Herman Göring, in this 358th BS crew portrait taken the week before the group's loss of nine aircraft over Wiesbaden on 15 August 1944. Göring flew 49 missions with the 303rd, and was promoted to captain upon becoming a lead pilot. His copilot, 1Lt Jack Rencher (back row, second from left) had over 1000 hours in B-17s, having served at the Yuma AAF Gunnery School, Arizona, prior to being posted to the 303rd. He was a great back-up for his fledgling first pilot in what could have been a difficult situation had their aircraft ever been badly damaged over Germany. Rencher himself became a first pilot on 21 November 1944. B-17G 43-37838, VK-A FEARLESS FOSDICK of the 358th BS was one of the group's Wiesbaden losses

Berlin, which turned into a target of opportunity run against a Danish airfield due to cloud, the group bombed effectively, although two B-17s received direct flak hits. 1Lt Winfield Yarnall's aircraft broke in half just behind the wings, falling in two pieces that took all but the tail gunner to their death. Illustrating war's random nature, *Banshee* took a direct hit in the rear which killed the tail gunner as it blew off the rudder and part of the vertical stabiliser, shredded the elevators and took off pieces from the horizontal stabilisers. But its crew somehow managed to get the B-17 back to England, where the survivors all baled out to safety.

Col Stevens returned to the USA for well-earned leave on 1 September and 1Lt Col Lyle took over as temporary CO as the group logged 13 raids between then and the 27th. Its missions were largely against marshalling yards, chemical plants and oil targets. A 427th aircraft was lost to flak on the 9th (Ludwigshafen), the 359th's *Lanesome Polecat* and the 360th's *Temptress* to fighters and flak on the 12th (Brux, Czechoslovakia), the 427th's *Betty Jane* and the 359th's *Liberty Run* to Merseburg's flak on the 13th and a final 360th ship to flak over Osnabrück on the 26th. But the losses did not stop the group from throwing a big party on the 24th to celebrate its second anniversary in the European theatre.

The final mission of the month, on the 28th, was a visit to the Krupp works in Magdeburg. The 303rd was deployed in front-to-back squadron formations with 30 aircraft. Flying in the third formation was 1Lt Walter Mayer, pilot of the 358th's 43-38176 *Bouncing Betty II*. He said:

'All was routine until we turned onto the bomb run, when German fighters hit the group ahead of us, and in the short span of about 20 seconds we saw the space where there had been 12 B-17s turned into a mass of burning debris streaming down to the ground. No 'chutes or any sign of survivors. By then the fighters attacked us, and on the first pass our two wingmen caught fire, pulled out of formation and were going down. We performed a slip manoeuvre by inputting left aileron and right rudder as an evasive action, which may have saved our lives by not allowing the enemy to get a bead on us.'

The *Sturmgruppen* had struck again. The initial punch was delivered by IV. *Sturm* JG 3, with JG 300's Fw 190s following up. When they were

group's drop set off large explosions throughout the Leuna refinery complex. Shupe then collapsed from loss of blood, but survived as one of nine wounded in the 19 aircraft which suffered major damage. Four more received minor hits. Two 359th aircraft failed to return. *Myasis Dragon* took a direct hit in the bomb-bay during the bomb run, peeled off and went into a final vertical dive. Only two crew survived when they managed to escape by parachute. 1Lt Truman Eldridge's PFF B-17 also fell, but all aboard became PoWs.

Two days later it was the 360th BS's turn. During a raid against



The wreck of B-17G 43-38176 VK-B *Bouncing Betty II* of the 358th BS was photographed in a Belgian farmer's field on 28 August 1944. The aircraft was abandoned by Lt Walter Mayer's crew after a difficult flight westward following heavy battle damage sustained near Magdeburg when the 303rd BG was attacked by elements of two *Sturmgruppen*. This was the only aircraft not lost immediately after the attack (Walter Mayer)

where the crew was rescued by Allied troops. One of the crew was wounded and Mayer himself suffered a 'green stick' leg fracture on landing, although he was back at Molesworth flying missions a month later.

Once again the group had been decimated. In the 358th all aboard Lt Gillespie's aircraft, on Mayer's right wing, died, and all but one in *Silver Fox*, to his left, were killed. Six of nine in the 359th's *Miss Umbriago* died, and the statistics were especially grim for the 360th BS: 2Lt Charles Railing's crew, nine killed; *Flak Hack*, eight killed, one captured; 1Lt James Hahn's crew, six killed, three captured; 2Lt Edward Shields' crew, eight killed, one captured; *Minnie the Mocker*, five killed, four captured; 2Lt Victor Howard's crew, one killed, eight captured. The remaining group aircraft brought five wounded home between them.

The loss of 11 B-17s topped even the Oschersleben raid. But although nobody one could know it at the time, the 303rd would never again suffer such losses to enemy aircraft. Despite its wounds, the group was back in the air on 2 October to resume the routine of hitting of oil, industrial and transportation targets, while suffering occasional flak losses. This time the pattern continued in almost unbroken succession to the end of 1944, by which time the 'Hell's Angels' had completed 46 missions. It lost three aircraft in October, 11 in November and none in December.

On 11 October the group dispatched four squadrons, two to attack a synthetic oil plant at Wesseling and the other two to strike marshalling yards at Koblenz. In the latter raid the 358th lost *Pugnacious Peter* (ten crew captured) to flak and Lt Truman Lord's B-17 (six killed, three captured). On the 15 October mission against Cologne, the 359th B-17 of 2Lt Edmund Gaines went down in flames, exploding at 10,000 ft. In a twist of providence reminiscent of Sgt Alan McGee's miraculous escape from *snapt! crackle! pop!*, bombardier Sgt Raymond Tartaglia was knocked unconscious as he was blown out of the aircraft's nose. He regained consciousness hanging in his parachute, but with no memory of pulling the ripcord. Tartaglia was the only one to survive.

There were major changes in the group's top leadership in October. On the 10th Lyle handed over temporary command to Lt Col Richard Cole, the 359th BS CO, so as to become CO of the 379th BG. After 57 missions with the 303rd, the group's outstanding combat commander was gone,

finished, ten B-17s had been lost and 13 damaged, of which some also dropped out of formation. Mayer's own ship was riddled and lost Nos 1 and 2 engines. He ordered the bombs salvoed, but the bomb-bay doors would not close. His engineer misinterpreted a 'prepare to bale out' order and jumped through the bomb-bay to his death. The ship spiralled from 27,000ft to 15,000ft before Mayer regained control, but after a long, perilous journey over enemy territory, the B-17 again became uncontrollable. It was abandoned at 6000 ft over Belgium,

although he would certainly not be forgotten. On the 29th the group learned that Stevens would not be returning from the USA. To his great surprise – Stevens had left almost all his personal belongings at Mulesworth – he was appointed to command a Second Air Force B-29 training base. His place was taken by Col William Raper, who had been one of the 303rd's original pilots at Gowen Field before being transferred to the 306th BG in August 1942. Three days later, Ed Snyder received promotion to lieutenant colonel and became the group's deputy CO. Both he and Raper would occupy these positions virtually to war's end, although Raper would be succeeded for the last mission by the group's final CO, Col William Sipes.

With the losses suffered in October, the new leadership faced some difficult times. And still the carnage continued. *THE 8 BALL Mk III* fell to flak on the 2nd, and on the 9th the group lost two 427th BS ships, *Full House* and a no-name, when they collided shortly after take-off with only one survivor. Flak accounted for *Marie*, a 359th Wiesbaden survivor, over Cologne on the 10th. The 358th's *Duffy's Tavern* blew up after take-off on the 11th at about 17,000 ft after a fire started in the No 1 engine.

Her demise saw yet another miracle of survival when the crew's waist gunner, Sgt Robert Sorenson, was blown out of the aircraft without a parachute, but had a parachute-pack drop into his arms with the other falling debris! After he buckled it onto his chest he could not pull the ripcord, but his frantic efforts bore fruit when he got the chute opened enough to enable him to survive, albeit with severe injuries after landing in a large tree. The only other survivor was the engineer who broke his back on landing.

Then came the worst ever loss to flak in a single-mission. On 21 November the guns at Merseburg claimed four group B-17s and caused major damage to another 31. On the 26th, two more were lost over Osnabrück, although it is not known if they both fell to flak. German fighters in the area made some sporadic attacks while ducking the escorts but group's records are unclear.

Yet in December the 303rd flew 16 missions and suffered no losses. Christmas Eve brought clear skies, which was just what the US Army needed when it was hard-pressed in the Battle of the Bulge. The Eighth made the ultimate maximum effort to support the ground troops, even ordering aircraft to fly which were not at their home bases after the previous day's mission. A record 2046 heavy bombers were dispatched, together with 853 fighters. The Luftwaffe was up in force too, but suffered a major defeat at the hands of the Eighth's P-51s. The American fighters claimed 74 German fighters in exchange for ten losses and two category E write-offs. Among the Luftwaffe units slaughtered was JG 300, caught out of its element at low altitude by P-51s. Cutting the cumbersome Fw 190 *Rammjäger* to pieces, the P-51s exacted a measure of revenge for the 303rd's losses over Wiesbaden and Magdeburg.

The year closed for the 'Hell's Angels' with the annual Christmas party for local children, a record 294 missions flown and B-17G 42-97298 *The Floose* of the 358th BS earning the distinction of being the first Eighth Air Force bomber to complete 100 missions. Unfortunately, the Fortress was wrecked on landing at the completion of its 102nd while being flown by a 92nd BG pilot on the Christmas Eve mission. It would be good to record

Over Berlin, an adjoining B-17 group is seen from a 303rd aircraft on 3 February 1945 in a view very much like that of 1Lt Robert Hand's on this mission. Note the high-visibility, red-bordered triangle-C on the wing, the single Olive Drab/Neutral Gray B-17 at lower left of the formation, and flak bursts below the bombers. The make up of late war Eighth Air Force B-17 formations are shown to good effect in this photograph

that the rest of the 303rd's war went as easily as had December 1944, but the 1945 record proves otherwise. The killing pace was maintained as the group flew 17 missions in January, passing the 300-mission mark on the 10th, but losing nine aircraft and crews by month's end. In February it again flew 17 missions, losing another four aircraft and crews.

What was it like? During the bomb-run over Berlin on 3 February 1Lt Robert Hand, a 359th bombardier, had a most unnerving experience, as he reveals in his book *Last Raid*:

"The lead ship dropped its load and ours went away almost simultaneously and the aircraft leaped for joy as tons of RDX explosive made their way earthward. I glanced again at my watch and it was 1106 hrs. The altitude was 24,500 ft. and then, WHACK! A burst appeared in front of the nose and sent a shower of Plexiglas fragments about the compartment as a large piece of shrapnel crashed through the nose, shattered the chin turret sight cradle and was deflected, just inches from my head, to hit the ceiling and fall spent to the floor. Four bursts swelled close at "12 o'clock" level and we flew through the fresh puffs. For a split-second the interior of the nose darkened. "Jee-sus, they were close!" I said out loud while I tried to moisten my lips with my dry tongue."

Moments later I land watched a B-17 in another formation completely explode from a direct hit.

In March the group flew a record 24 missions, and again four B-17s were lost. While most were to flak, the 20 March raid on Hamburg saw the group fighting off 15 to 20 Me 262 jet fighters, which attacked for 30 minutes, pressing in as close as 50 ft in 'six o'clock' runs. They accounted for two B-17s, including the 358th's *Gi-for-George*, also known as *Lit'Bit*, the only group bomber with white sidewall tyres on its wheels! In return, the group's gunners claimed five fighters destroyed, four





probables and three damaged. Escorting P-51s disrupted the Me 262s' attacks and finally drove them away.

The relentless pace continued into April as the 'Hell's Angels' flew 14 missions up to the 20th, losing five aircraft. Each loss was a reminder of the cost of war, and made more bitter by the knowledge that victory was in sight. After the 25th the Eighth flew no more missions because the bomber generals had decided they had run out of targets. But there was still that 364th mission to get in against the Skoda Armament Works in Pilsen, Czechoslovakia. The group made it a maximum effort, putting up 42 aircraft, all of which reached the target, but since the huge factory complex could not be seen through six-tenths cloud on the first bomb run, a second was made. The flak was terrible, wounding five men and causing two aircraft to divert. Major damage was inflicted on 24 and minor damage on 15 group B-17s which returned to Molesworth. But the bombing had been effective – practically every bomb landed in the target area, and a large explosion was seen.

Just after bomb release, flak hit a 427th B-17 flown by Lt Warren Mauger's crew. It fell out of formation and went almost straight down with the No 3 engine in flames. Mauger righted the aircraft to enable the crew to bale out and was heading for the nose hatch when the B-17 blew up. Four of Mauger's crew became PoWs but three were killed. Miraculously, Mauger survived the explosion, opening his parachute despite burns to hands and face. He landed in soft earth, and with the help of friendly farmers evaded the enemy for ten days until he reached American troops.

The moment he did so was the time when the long, hard war so ably fought by the 'Hell's Angels', the 'champions of the European theatre', was ended at last.

Over Pilsen – B-17s deal with six-tenths cloud cover over Pilsen, Czechoslovakia, during the raid on the Skoda Armament Works on 25 April 1945. This was the 303rd's 364th bombing mission, and the last to be flown by the Eighth Air Force in World War 2.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

ORIGINAL 303rd BG(H) B-17Fs AND THEIR FATE

Serial No.	Name	Sqd & A/C Code	Original Pilots*	Aircraft Fate**
41-24526	<i>Leapin' Liz</i>	358th BS VK-J	2Lt J B Clark	MIA 3 Jan 43
41-24539	<i>Jersey Bounce</i>	358th BS VK-K	1Lt R J Nolan	to Eighth AF 27 Jul 43, sal 31 May 45
41-24541	<i>Spook</i>	358th BS VK-B	1Lt L E Dunnica	MIA 16 Feb 43
41-24558	<i>Hunga Dunga</i>	358th ■ VK-F	1Lt J E Haas	MIA 18 Mar 43
41-24562	<i>Sky Wolf</i>	358th BS VK-A	2Lt C H Morales	MIA 11 Jan 44
41-24577	<i>Hell's Angels</i>	358th BS VK-C	Capt I E Baldwin	ret USA 20 Jan 44
41-24580	<i>Hell Cat</i>	358th BS VK-C	1Lt D T O'Connor	MIA 23 Jan 43
41-24582	<i>One O'Clock Jump</i>	358th BS VK-G	1Lt W N Frost	MIA 12 Dec 42
41-24806	<i>Werewolf</i>	358th BS VK-H	2Lt G J Oxrider	C/L UK 13 Jan 43, rep to 91st BG 22 Apr 43
41-24561	<i>The Duchess</i>	359th BS BN-T	1Lt H L Stouise	ret USA, 7 Jul 44
41-24565	<i>Idaho Potato Peeler</i>	359th BS BN-P	1Lt R C Bales	MIA 5 Nov 43
41-24566	<i>Zombie</i>	359th BS BN-W	1Lt O S Witt	MIA 20 Dec 42
41-24568	<i>Lady Fairweather</i>	359th BS BN-U	1Lt A R Reddig	MIA 23 Nov 42
41-24581	<i>The 8 Ball</i>	359th BS BN-O	Capt W R Cathoun	C/L UK 20 Dec 43
41-24603	<i>The Green Hornet</i>	359th BS BN-Y	2Lt E J Sanderson	MIA 23 Jan 43
41-24605	<i>Knockout Dropper</i>	359th BS BN-R	1Lt J Rolle	Ret USA post 27 Mar 44
41-24608	<i>Yehudi</i>	359th BS BN-S	1Lt F A Saunders	MIA 3 Jan 43
41-24609	<i>Holy Mackerel</i>	359th BS BN-Q	1Lt E F Eyster	MIA 4 Apr 43
41-24559	<i>Oooid Soljer</i>	360th BS PU-C	Capt L E Lyle	crashed after mid-air collision 31 Mar 43
41-24563	<i>Garbage</i>	360th BS PU-U	2Lt A I Adams	forced landing and A/C collision 11 Nov 43
41-24567	<i>Beats Me</i>	360th BS PU-J	1Lt L M Schulstad	MIA 23 Jan 43
41-24579	<i>Thumper</i>	360th BS PU-F	2Lt J E Castle	C/L UK 23 Jan 43
41-24585	<i>Wulfe Hound</i>	360th BS PU-B	1Lt P F Flickenger	MIA 12 Dec 42, salvaged and flown by Luftwaffe
41-24602	<i>Yardbird</i>	360th BS PU-A	1Lt J W Farrar	MIA 29 May 43
41-24620	<i>snapt crackle! pop!</i>	360th BS PU-O	1Lt J W Fredericks	MIA 3 Jan 43
42-2967	<i>Shak-Hak</i>	360th ■ PU-G	1Lt W H Breed	MIA 16 Feb 43
41-24517	<i>Keli</i>	427th BS GN-O	1Lt W H Goetz	MIA 3 Jan 43
41-24569	<i>Memphis Tot</i>	427th BS GN-W	Capt L R Cole	MIA 4 Feb 43
41-24584	<i>Sustu</i>	427th BS GN-Q	1Lt E J Broussard	MIA 23 Jan 43
41-24587	<i>Bad Check</i>	427th BS GN-P	Capt BB Southworth Jr	MIA 11 Jan 44
41-24807	<i>Jerry Jinx</i>	427th BS GN-W	1Lt E H Reber	MIA 23 Jan 43
41-24610	<i>Joe Btfsplk II</i>	427th BS GN-T	1Lt D E Stockton	MIA 1 May 43
41-24612	<i>The Devil Himself</i>	427th BS GN-R	1Lt R S Hayes	to Eighth AF 25 May 43, ret USA 20 Dec 44
41-24619	<i>S-for-Sugar</i>	427th BS GN-S	Capt G E Hagenbuch	MIA 11 Jan 44
42-2966	no-name	427th BS GN-U	1Lt H A Robey Jr	to Eighth AF 4 Jul 43

Key

BS – bomb squadron; C/L – crash landed and written off; KIA – killed in action; MIA – missing in action; PoW – prisoner of war; ret USA – returned to USA; rep – repaired; sal – salvaged; sqn – squadron; to – transferred to, specific unit not always indicated

* Of the 35 original pilots, 21 (60 per cent) were killed in action or became prisoners of war

** Of the 35 original aircraft, only three returned to the USA directly from the 303rd. One or possibly two other aircraft returned to the USA after being transferred to other units

APPENDIX 2

LONGEST FLYING 303rd BG B-17s

B-17Fs FLOWN ON MISSIONS BETWEEN 17 November 1943 and 12 May 1944

Squadron &					Total		
Serial No.	Aircraft Code	Aircraft Name	Aircraft Fate	Date	Missions	Crew Chief	
41-24605	359th BS BN-R	<i>Knockout Dropper</i>	To USA	? Jun 44	75	M/Sgt Buford G Pafford	
41-24561	359th BS BN-T	<i>The Duchess</i>	To USA	7 Jul 44	59	M/Sgt Clyde L Dewald	
42-2973	360th BS PU-G	<i>Iza Vailable</i>	To USA	11 Apr 44	54	M/Sgt Robert B Heiliger	
41-24619	427th BS GN-S	<i>S-for-Sugar</i>	MIA	11 Jan 44	52	M/Sgt Fred W Kuhne	
41-24577	358th BS VK-D	<i>Hell's Angels</i>	To USA	20 Jan 44	48	M/Sgt Fabian S Folmer	
41-24587	427th BS GN-P	<i>Bad Check</i>	MIA	11 Jan 44	45	Unknown	
42-5260	360th BS PU-A	<i>Yardbird II</i>	MIA	2 Oct 43	43	M/Sgt Milo Abraham	
42-5393	360th BS PU-G	<i>Thumper Again</i>	To USA	18 Jun 44	43	M/Sgt Alexander J Bourque Jr	

B-17Gs FLOWN ON MISSIONS BETWEEN 16 November 1943 and 25 April 1945

Squadron &					Total		
Serial No.	Aircraft Code	Aircraft Name	Aircraft Fate	Date	Missions	Crew Chief	
42-39885	427th BS GN-Z & R	<i>Sweet Rose O'Grady</i>	Scrapped Kingman	8 Dec 45	134	M/Sgt Frank F Furman	
43-37590	358th BS VK-Q	<i>Nova The Silver Lady</i>	Scrapped Kingman	27 June 45	127	M/Sgt Albert C Fox	
42-107206	359th BS BN-R	<i>Old Black Magic</i>	Crash-Landed	25 Apr 45	22	S/Sgt Blaine R Ruark	
42-97944	359th BS BN-I	<i>Daddy's Delight</i>	Scrapped Kingman	13 Dec 45	118	T/Sgt John L Peterson	
42-38050	359th BS BN-U	<i>Thunder Bird</i>	Scrapped Kingman	21 Dec 45	112	M/Sgt James P Thompson	
42-102544	360th BS PU-K	<i>Sack Time</i>	MIA	27 Apr 45	110	M/Sgt Robert P Heiliger	
42-97311	427th BS GN-D	<i>Shoo Shoo Baby</i>	Scrapped Kingman	14 Dec 45	107	T/Sgt Howard E Isaacson	
42-97546	360th BS PU-E	<i>Idaliza</i>	Scrapped Kingman	12 Jan 45	104	M/Sgt Norman A Cote	
42-97298	358th BS VK-H	<i>The Floose</i>	Crash-Landed	24 Dec 44	102	M/Sgt George W Ham	
44-6006	358th BS VK-E	no-name	Scrapped Kingman	8 Dec 45	100	Unknown	
42-39875	427th BS GN-S	<i>Buzz Blonde</i>	Mid-air Collision	10 Jan 45	100	T/Sgt Cecil J 'Red' Whitney	
42-37841	360th BS PU-P	<i>Banshee</i>	MIA	27 Aug 44	97	Unknown	
42-31483	359th BS BN-P	<i>Bonnie B</i>	Crash-Landed France	5 Sep 44	93	M/Sgt William P Zachar	
42-31340	360th BS PU-D	<i>Miss Liberty</i>	Crash-Landed France	12 Sep 44	93	M/Sgt Willis G Meyer	
42-102569	427th BS GN-X	<i>Miss Lace</i>	Crash-Landed	8 Jan 45	87	M/Sgt Walter N Moore Jr	
43-38289	359th BS BN-P	<i>Sweet LaRhonda</i>	Scrapped Kingman	27 Nov 45	87	Unknown	
42-32027	427th BS GN-E	<i>Betty Jane</i>	MIA	13 Sep 44	86	S/Sgt Oldrich Fojt	
42-102496	359th BS BN-M	<i>Special Delivery</i>	Crash-Landed	18 Sep 44	86	Unknown	
42-31739	358th BS VK-P	<i>Pugnacious Peter</i>	MIA	11 Oct 44	85	Unknown	
43-38563	360th BS PU-H	<i>Jackie</i>	To 351 BG	4 Jan 45	83	Unknown	
44-6516	360th BS PU-Q	<i>My Darling</i>	Scrapped Kingman	8 Dec 45	83	Unknown	
44-6517	360th BS PU-F	<i>Old Cock</i>	Scrapped Kingman	28 Nov 45	82	Unknown	
43-38532	360th BS PU-G	no-name	Scrapped Kingman	1 Dec 45	80	Unknown	
43-37597	427th BS GN-I	<i>Earthquake McGoon</i>	MIA	17 Apr 45	79	Unknown	
42-102411	427th BS GN-Y	<i>Miss Lace</i>	MIA	18 Mar 45	79	M/Sgt Walter N Moore Jr	
42-97281	360th BS PU-Q	<i>Queenie</i>	Crash-Landed	11 Mar 45	78+	M/Sgt James C Hicks	
42-31830	360th BS PU-N	<i>Marie</i>	MIA	10 Nov 44	78	M/Sgt Lester C Hanson	
42-107099	427th BS GN-W	<i>Old 99</i>	MIA	3 Jan 45	78	M/Sgt Jimmie Stewart	
43-38191	358th BS VK-A	<i>Shasta</i>	Crash-Landed	25 Apr 45	77	Unknown	
44-6523	360th BS PU-A	no-name	Crash-Landed	12 Apr 45	77	Unknown	

APPENDIX 3

303rd BG KEY STATISTICS

Compiled by Harry ■ Gobrecht, 303rd BGA Historian

ACTION AGAINST ENEMY

Combat Missions	364
Aircraft Sorties	10,721
Bomb Tonnage	26,346

Enemy Fighter Claims

Destroyed	378 (57 per cent)
Probably Destroyed	104 (16 per cent)
Damaged	182 (27 per cent)
Total Fighter Claims	664 (100 per cent)

Killed in Action (KIA)

On MIA B-17s	769
In returned B-17s	■
Training Flights - USA	8
Training Flights - UK	32
Total KIA	841

Prisoners of War (PoW)

PoWs captured, in prison camps	744
Captured and murdered	18
Repatriated while a PoW	12
Died of wounds while a PoW	11
Escaped while a PoW	3
Evaded/Captured/Murdered	1
Escaped while a PoW and killed	1
Total PoWs	790

Other MIA Survivors

Evaded capture from enemy	67
B-17 ditched, crew rescued	64
Switzerland Internee	29
Total Other Survivors	160

AIRCRAFT LOSSES (A/C MIA)

(total 303rd BG losses of 210 B-17s was 51 more than total
USAAF four-engined bomber strength on 7 December 1941)

In Enemy Territory - 140

German Fighters	65
Flak	52
Unknown causes	13
Mid-Air Collisions	10
(67 per cent total A/C MIA)	140

In Friendly Territory - 16

To Switzerland - Interned	3
To Italy - Salvaged	1
To Russia - Salvaged	3
Crash-landings	6
Abandoned - Crew baled-out	3
(eight per cent total A/C MIA)	16

Lost At Sea - 24

Ditchings	23
Abandoned Over Sea and crew baled-out over land	1
(11 per cent total A/C MIA)	24

Lost In UK - 30

Abandoned - Crew Bale-out	7
Crash-landings	13
Mid-air collisions	6
Crash after take-off	4
(14 per cent total A/C MIA)	30

APPENDIX 4

MAJOR 303rd BG UNIT AND INDIVIDUAL AWARDS

Unit Award – Presidential Distinguished Unit Citation

Awarded to all bombardment groups of the 1st Bombardment Division (H) 'for extraordinary heroism, determination, and esprit de corps in action against the enemy on 11 January 1944' in pressing on and successfully attacking vital aircraft factory targets in central Germany, despite ferocious German fighter opposition and adverse weather conditions that prevented comprehensive Allied fighter escort support. The 303rd Bombardment Group (H) led the 1st Division on this mission under the command of Brig Gen Robert F Travis, with Lt Col William M Calhoun as pilot of the lead ship carrying Gen Travis.

Medal of Honor

For Conspicuous Gallantry and Intrepidity Above and Beyond the Call to Duty in Action Against the Enemy

1Lt Jack W Mathis	Bombardier	359th BS	18 March 1943 (posthumous)
S/Sgt Forrest L Vosler	Radio Operator	358th BS	20 December 1943

Distinguished Service Cross

For Extraordinary Heroism in Connection with Military Operations Against an Armed Enemy of the United States

2Lt Charles W Spencer	bombardier	358th BS	11 November 1943
S/Sgt William T J Werner	tail gunner	427th BS	22 February 1943
2Lt Thomas J Dello Buono	bombardier	360th BS	13 April 1944
Lt Col Lewis E Lyle	pilot/squadron CO	360th BS	September 1944 – Outstanding heroism and leadership during the period 17 November 1942 to 15 June 1943

APPENDIX 5

COMBAT MISSIONS OF THE 303rd BG FROM 17 NOVEMBER 1942 TO 25 APRIL 1945

No.	Date	Target
1	17 Nov 42	U-boat pens, St Nazaire, France
2	18 Nov 42	U-boat pens, St Nazaire, France
3	22 Nov 42	U-boat pens, Lorient, France
4	23 Nov 42	U-boat pens, St Nazaire, France
5	6 Dec 42	carriage and wagon works, Lille, France
6	12 Dec 42	rail marshalling yards, Rouen, France
7	20 Dec 42	air depot, Romilly-Sur-Seine, France
8	30 Dec 42	cement-topped U-boat pens, Lorient, France
9	3 Jan 43	torpedo storage areas, St Nazaire, France
10	13 Jan 43	Fives company locomotive works, Lille, France
11	23 Jan 43	Lorient port area and U-boat pens, Brest, France
12	27 Jan 43	naval base, Wilhelmshaven, Germany
13	2 Feb 43	rail marshalling yards, Hamm, Germany
14	4 Feb 43	industrial targets north-west of Osnabrück, Germany
15	14 Feb 43	industrial targets, Hamm, Germany
16	16 Feb 43	St Nazaire port area, France
17	26 Feb 43	U-boat yards, Wilhelmshaven, Germany
18	27 Feb 43	U-boat pens, Brest, France
19	4 Mar 43	rail marshalling yards, Rotterdam, Holland
20	6 Mar 43	power station and bridge, Lorient, France
21	8 Mar 43	rail marshalling yards, Rennes, France
22	12 Mar 43	rail marshalling yards, Rouen, France
23	13 Mar 43	rail marshalling yards, Amiens/Longeau, France
24	18 Mar 43	U-boat construction yard, Vegesack, Germany
25	22 Mar 43	port docking area, Wilhelmshaven, Germany
26	28 Mar 43	rail marshalling yards, Rouen, France
27	31 Mar 43	Wilton shipyards, Rotterdam, Holland
28	4 Apr 43	Renault motor works, Paris, France
29	5 Apr 43	Erla aircraft works, Antwerp, Belgium
30	16 Apr 43	power station, Lorient, France
31	17 Apr 43	Focke-Wulf factory, Bremen, Germany
32	1 May 43	harbour installations, St Nazaire, France

33	4 May 43	General Motors/Ford motor plants, Antwerp, Belgium	61	19 Aug 43	Gilze-Rijen aerodrome and storehouses, Holland
34	13 May 43	Potez aircraft factory, Meaulte, France	62	23 Aug 43	air-sea rescue search mission
35	14 May 43	Germania Werft AG (U-boat pens), Kiel, Germany	63	24 Aug 43	diversion mission over North Sea
36	15 May 43	airfield/naval installations, Heligoland Islands, Germany	64	27 Aug 43	V-weapons installation site, Watten, France
37	17 May 43	Keroman U-boat pens, Lorient, France	65	31 Aug 43	Amiens-Glisys aerodrome, France
38	19 May 43	Deutsch Werft A G (shipbuilding yards), Kiel, Germany	66	3 Sep 43	Luftwaffe aircraft repair depot, Romilly-Sur-Seine, France
39	21 May 43	Marinwerke U-boat pens, Wilhelmshaven, Germany	67	6 Sep 43	Robert Bosch A G factory, Stuttgart, Germany
40	29 May 43	U-boat locks/dock area, St Nazaire, France	■	7 Sep 43	Evere aerodrome, Brussels, Belgium
41	11 Jun 43	U-boat slips and docks, Wilhelmshaven, Germany	69	9 Sep 43	Vitry-En-Artois aerodrome, Douai, France
42	13 Jun 43	U-boat slips, Bremen, Germany	70	16 Sep 43	supply ship, Loire River, Nantes, France
43	22 Jun 43	synthetic rubber plant, Hüls, Germany	71	23 Sep 43	U-boat supply ship at Nantes, France
43A	23 Jun 43	Villacoublay aerodrome, France	71A	26 Sep 43	port area, Nantes, France (recalled)
44	25 Jun 43	shipyards/U-boat buildings, Hamburg, Germany	72	27 Sep 43	port area, Emden, Germany
45	26 Jun 43	aircraft works, Villacoublay aerodrome, Paris, France	73	2 Oct 43	port area and dock facilities, Emden, Germany
■	28 Jun 43	ammunition depot, West of Beaumont-Le Roger aerodrome, France	74	4 Oct 43	aircraft components plant, Heddernheim/Frankfurt, Germany
47	29 Jun 43	aircraft factory, Villacoublay, Paris, France	75	8 Oct 43	Bremen city centre, Germany
48	4 Jul 43	Gnome Rhone aircraft works, Le Mans, France	76	9 Oct 43	aircraft component plant, Anklam, Germany
49	10 Jul 43	Poix and Abbeville airfields, France	77	10 Oct 43	Coesfeld city centre, Germany
50	14 Jul 43	Villacoublay aircraft repair depot, Paris, France	78	14 Oct 43	VKF ball bearing plant, Schweinfurt, Germany
51	17 Jul 43	synthetic rubber plant, Hannover, Germany	79	20 Oct 43	Diiren city centre, Germany
52	24 Jul 43	Nordisk magnesium/aluminium factory, Heroya, Norway	80	3 Nov 43	joiner shop and dock facilities, Wilhelmshaven, Germany
53	25 Jul 43	Blohm und Voss shipbuilding yards, Hamburg, Germany	81	5 Nov 43	Gelsenkirchen city centre, Germany
54	26 Jul 43	Nuehof power station, Hamburg, Germany	82	16 Nov 43	molybdenum mine, Knaben, Norway
■	29 Jul 43	airfield, Heligoland Islands, Germany	83	26 Nov 43	Bremen city area, Germany
56	30 Jul 43	Fieseler aircraft works, Utschlag, Kassel, Germany	84	29 Nov 43	city of Bremen, Germany (PFF bombing)
56A	4 Aug 43	night flight	85	1 Dec 43	Solingen city area, Germany (PFF bombing)
57	12 Aug 43	Benzine/synthetic oil refinery, Gelsenkirchen, Germany	86	5 Dec 43	St Jean D'Angely, France (no bombs dropped)
■	15 Aug 43	Poix and Amiens/Glisys aerodromes, France	87	11 Dec 43	port and dock area, Emden, Germany
59	16 Aug 43	Le Bourget aerodrome, Paris, France	88	13 Dec 43	Bremen city area, Germany (PFF bombing)
60	17 Aug 43	VKF ball bearing works No 1, Schweinfurt, Germany	89	16 Dec 43	Bremen city area, Germany
			90	20 Dec 43	Bremen city area, Germany
			91	22 Dec 43	railway intersection, Osnabrück, Germany
			92	24 Dec 43	construction works, Vacqueriette, France
			93	30 Dec 43	I G Farben Chemical Works, Ludwigshafen, Germany
			94	31 Dec 43	blockade runner ship Orsono, Bordeaux, France
			95	4 Jan 44	Kiel city area, Germany

96	5 Jan 44	Kiel city centre, Germany	130	28 Mar 44	Dijon/Longvic aerodrome, France
97	7 Jan 44	IG Farben chemical works, Ludwigshafen, Germany	131	29 Mar 44	barracks area, Stedorf, Germany
98	11 Jan 44	AGO Flugzeugwerke A G, Oschersleben, Germany	132	9 Apr 44	Focke-Wulf aircraft factory, Marienburg, Germany
99	14 Jan 44	Crossbow construction works, Le Meillard, France	133	10 Apr 44	aircraft factory, Brussels/Evere, Belgium
100	21 Jan 44	Crossbow targets, Bois Coquerel and Bealieu, France	134	11 Apr 44	Fw 190 assembly factory, Sorau, Germany
101	29 Jan 44	Frankfurt city area, Germany	135	13 Apr 44	Kugelfischer ball bearing works, Schweinfurt, Germany
102	30 Jan 44	twin-engined fighter production centre, Brunswick, Germany	136	18 Apr 44	Ernst Heinkel factory, Oranienburg, Germany
103	3 Feb 44	U-boat facilities, Wilhelmshaven, Germany	137	19 Apr 44	branch aircraft assembly factory, Kassel, Germany
104	4 Feb 44	Frankfurt city area, Germany	137A	19 Apr 44	air-sea rescue mission
105	5 Feb 44	Bricy airfield, Orleans, France	138	20 Apr 44	Crossbow targets, Sottevast, France
106	■ Feb 44	Dijon/Longvic aerodrome, Duon, France	139	22 Apr 44	rail marshalling yards, Hamin, Germany
107	8 Feb 44	Frankfurt city area, Germany	140	24 Apr 44	Oberpfaffenhofen aerodrome, Germany
108	11 Feb 44	Rhineland Industrial Centre, Frankfurt, Germany	141	25 Apr 44	Metz/Frescaty aerodrome, France
109	20 Feb 44	Junkers bomber assembly factory, Leipzig, Germany	142	27 Apr 44	Crossbow targets at Sottevast, France
110	21 Feb 44	Deipholz aerodrome, Germany	143	27 Apr 44	Toul/Croix de Metz aerodrome, France
111	22 Feb 44	Junkers Flugzeug motors, Aschersleben, Germany	144	■ Apr 44	Berlin city area, Germany
112	24 Feb 44	Kugelfischer ball bearing works, Schweinfurt, Germany	145	30 Apr 44	Lyon/Bron aerodrome, France
113	22 Feb 44	Norma ball bearing plant, Stuttgart, Germany	146	7 May 44	Friedrichstrasse station, Berlin, Germany
114	■ Feb 44	Crossbow targets, Bois-Coquerel, France	147	8 May 44	Berlin city area, Germany
115	2 Mar 44	VKF ball bearing works, Frankfurt, Germany	148	8 May 44	Crossbow targets, Sottevast, France
116	3 Mar 44	VKF ball bearing works, Berlin (Erkner), Germany	149	9 May 44	rail marshalling yard, Thionville, France
117	4 Mar 44	targets of opportunity, Bonn/Köln, Germany	150	4 May 44	Berlin, Germany (recalled)
118	6 Mar 44	city area, Berlin (Erkner), Germany	151	11 May 44	rail marshalling yards, Saarbrücken, Germany
119	8 Mar 44	VKF ball bearing Works, Berlin (Erkner), Germany	152	12 May 44	Louna synthetic oil plant, Merseburg, Germany
120	9 Mar 44	Berlin city area, Germany	153	13 May 44	Stettin-Posen city area, Germany
121	16 Mar 44	Augsburg city area, Germany	154	15 May 44	V-weapon site at Mimoyecques, France
122	18 Mar 44	aircraft factory and aerodrome, Lechfeld, Germany	155	19 May 44	Berlin city area, Germany
123	19 Mar 44	Crossbow targets, Wizernes, France	156	■ May 44	Orly aerodrome, France
124	20 Mar 44	Frankfurt city area, Germany	157	22 May 44	port area facilities, Kiel, Germany
125	22 Mar 44	Berlin city area, Germany	158	23 May 44	rail marshalling yards, Saarbrücken, Germany
126	23 Mar 44	rail marshalling yards, Hamm, Ahlen city area, Germany	159	24 May 44	Berlin city area, Germany
127	24 Mar 44	Frankfurt city area, Germany	160	25 May 44	rail marshalling yards, Blainville, France
128	■ Mar 44	Crossbow targets, Wizernes, France	161	27 May 44	rail marshalling yards, Mannheim, Germany
129	27 Mar 44	Chartres aerodrome, France	162	■ May 44	Eifeltor marshalling yard, Cologne, Germany
			163	■ May 44	Moblis thermal electric power station, Gotha, Germany
			164	29 May 44	Fw 190 aircraft plant, Posen, Poland
			165	30 May 44	Junkers aircraft plant/airfield, Halberstadt, Germany
			166	31 May 44	Gilze-Rijen aerodrome, Holland
			167	2 Jun 44	gun emplacements (No-Ball targets), Dannes, France

168	2 Jun 44	rail marshalling yards, Juvisy, France	205	17 Jul 44	rail bridges, Peronne/Jussey, France
169	3 Jun 44	gun emplacements (Pas De Calais area), St Cecily, France	206	18 Jul 44	experimental V-rocket site, Peenemünde, Germany
170	4 Jun 44	gun emplacements, Le Touquet, France	207	19 Jul 44	industrial sites, Holtriegelskreuth, Germany
171	5 Jun 44	gun emplacements, Azeville, Lessay, Caen, France	208	20 Jul 44	Junkers Flugzeug Motorwerke, Dessau, Germany
172	6 Jun 44	tactical bridge, Caen, France	209	21 Jul 44	Lachen aerodrome, Ludwigshafen, Germany
173	6 Jun 44	tactical bridge, Caen, France	210	23 Jul 44	Creil aerodrome, France
174	6 Jun 44	city area, Vire and Conde-Sur-Noireau, France	211	24 Jul 44	Operation <i>Cobra</i> – army support, St Lo, France
175	7 Jun 44	road junctions, Flers and Conde Sur Noireau, France	212	25 Jul 44	German troop centres, St Lo, France
176	8 Jun 44	rail marshalling yards and bridge, Orleans, France	213	26 Jul 44	Leuna synthetic oil plant, Merseburg, Germany
177	10 Jun 44	Nantes/Bougeumaie aerodrome, France	214	29 Jul 44	Leuna synthetic oil plant, Merseburg, Germany
178	12 Jun 44	Cambrai/Epinoz aerodrome, France	215	31 Jul 44	aero engine works, Munich, Germany
179	13 Jun 44	Evreux aerodrome, France	216	1 Aug 44	Orleans/Bricy aerodrome, France
180	14 Jun 44	Creil and Coulommiers aerodromes, France	217	3 Aug 44	military installation at Fresnoy/Crepieul, France
181	15 Jun 44	tactical bridge, Possonniere, France	218	4 Aug 44	Luftwaffe experimental V-rocket site, Peenemünde, Germany
182	16 Jun 44	Juvincourt aerodrome, France	219	4 Aug 44	railroad bridge/canal locks, Graveline/Fleury, France
183	18 Jun 44	oil installations, Hamburg, Germany	220	11 Aug 44	Flers, Flets, Fleury, Cousbronno, Crepieul, Fressin and Coxyde, France
184	19 Jun 44	<i>No-Ball</i> V-weapons targets, Fiels and Predefin, France	221	6 Aug 44	aero engine works, Genshagen, Germany
185	19 Jun 44	<i>No-Ball</i> V-weapons targets, Fiels and Predefin, France	222	7 Aug 44	Chartres/St Quen aerodrome, France
186	20 Jun 44	oil installations, Hamburg, Germany	223	8 Aug 44	tactical mission/ground troops, Caen, France
187	21 Jun 44	Berlin city area, Germany	224	9 Aug 44	boot and shoe factory, Pirmasens, Germany
188	22 Jun 44	<i>No-Ball</i> V-weapons site, Wizernes, France	225	11 Aug 44	tactical ground support mission, Brest, France
189	22 Jun 44	rail marshalling yard, Lille, France	226	12 Aug 44	rail marshalling yards, Metz, France
190	24 Jun 44	Deutsche Vacuum A G works, Bremen, Germany	227	13 Aug 44	road junction at Eureux-Bernay, France
191	25 Jun 44	Toulouse/Franczal aerodrome, France	228	14 Aug 44	Stuttgart/Echterdingen aerodrome, Germany
192	25 Jun 44	bridges at Sens and Coulanges-Sur-Yonne, France	229	15 Aug 44	Wiesbaden aerodrome, Germany
193	28 Jun 44	Juvincourt aerodrome, France	230	18 Aug 44	railroad bridges at Liege/Val Bendit, Belgium
194	29 Jun 44	Erla aircraft components factory, Heiterblick (Leipzig), Germany	231	24 Aug 44	Leuna synthetic oil plant, Merseburg, Germany
195	30 Jun 44	LeCulot and Coxyde aerodrome, Belgium	232	25 Aug 44	Anklam aerodrome, Germany
196	5 Jul 44	Gilze-Rijen aerodrome, Holland	233	27 Aug 44	Esbjerg aerodrome, Denmark
197	6 Jul 44	V-weapons sites at Beaumetz-Les-Aire, France	234	30 Aug 44	<i>No-Ball</i> V1 launching sites, Cauche D'Ecques, France
198	7 Jul 44	Muckau aerodrome near Leipzig, Germany	235	3 Sep 44	I G Farben plant, Ludwigshafen, Germany
199	8 Jul 44	rail bridge, Etaples, France	236	5 Sep 44	I G Farben plant, Ludwigshafen, Germany
200	9 Jul 44	Chateaudun aerodrome, France	237	8 Sep 44	I G Farben plant, Ludwigshafen, Germany
201	11 Jul 44	Munich city area, Germany			
202	12 Jul 44	Munich city area, Germany			
203	13 Jul 44	Munich city area, Germany			
204	16 Jul 44	Munich city area, Germany			

238	9 Sep 44	I G Farben plant, Ludwigshafen, Germany	273	16 Nov 44	ground troop support, Weisweiler, Germany
239	10 Sep 44	rail marshalling yard, Stuttgart, Germany	274	20 Nov 44	Buer synthetic oil plant, Gelsenkirchen, Germany
240	11 Sep 44	synthetic oil plant, Lutzkendorf, Germany	275	21 Nov 44	Leuna synthetic oil plant, Merseburg, Germany
241	12 Sep 44	synthetic oil plant, Brux, Czechoslovakia	276	23 Nov 44	synthetic oil plant, Gelsenkirchen and Duisberg, Germany
242	13 Sep 44	BMW motor plant, Eisenach-Merseburg, Germany	277	■ Nov 44	rail viaduct, Altenbecken/Osnabrück, Germany
243	17 Sep 44	Eindhoven and Hertogenbosch Areas, Holland	278	27 Nov 44	rail marshalling yards, Offenburg, Germany
244	19 Sep 44	rail marshalling yards, Osnabrück/Hamm, Germany	279	29 Nov 44	synthetic oil refinery, Merseburg, Germany
245	21 Sep 44	rail marshalling yards, Mainz, Germany	280	30 Nov 44	synthetic oil refinery, Zeitz, Germany
246	■ Sep 44	rail marshalling yards, Osnabrück, Germany	281	2 Dec 44	rail marshalling yards, Oberlahnstein, Germany
247	27 Sep 44	rail marshalling yards, Cologne, Germany	282	4 Dec 44	rail marshalling yards, Soest, Germany
248	28 Sep 44	Fred Krupp Grusonwerke AG, Magdeburg, Germany	283	6 Dec 44	Leuna synthetic oil plant, Merseburg, Germany
249	2 Oct 44	Ford motor transport plant, Cologne, Germany	284	9 Dec 44	airfield and rail station, Stuttgart, Germany
250	3 Oct 44	synthetic oil plant, Wesseling-Cologne, Germany	285	11 Dec 44	rail bridge, Mannheim, Germany
251	5 Oct 44	Ford motor plant, Cologne, Germany	286	12 Dec 44	Leuna synthetic oil plant, Merseburg, Germany
252	6 Oct 44	power plant, Stralsund-Politz, Germany	286A	16 Dec 44	rail marshalling yard, Ulm, Germany
253	7 Oct 44	rail marshalling yards and military targets, Dresden, Germany	287	18 Dec 44	rail marshalling yards, Koblenz, Germany
254	9 Oct 44	ball bearing plant and cycle works, Schweinfurt, Germany	288	19 Dec 44	tactical troop support, Kall/Blankenheim, Germany
255	11 Oct 44	synthetic oil plant, Wesseling, Germany	289	23 Dec 44	rail marshalling yards, Ehrang, Germany
256	14 Oct 44	rail marshalling yards, Saarbrücken, Germany	290	24 Dec 44	landing ground, Morzhausen, Germany
257	15 Oct 44	rail marshalling yards, Cologne, Germany	291	27 Dec 44	rail marshalling yards, Euskirchen, Germany
258	17 Oct 44	military installations, Cologne, Germany	291A	28 Dec 44	rail marshalling yards, Sieburg, Germany
259	18 Oct 44	Ford motor plant, Cologne, Germany	292	29 Dec 44	rail bridge, Bullay, Germany
260	19 Oct 44	Heinrich Lenz Tractor/Tank Works, Mannheim, Germany	293	30 Dec 44	rail marshalling yards, Kaiserlautern, Germany
261	22 Oct 44	tank assembly plant, Brunswick, Germany	294	31 Dec 44	rail marshalling yards, Neuss, Germany
262	25 Oct 44	rail marshalling yards, Hamm, Germany	295	1 Jan 45	rail marshalling yards, Kassel, Germany
263	26 Oct 44	rail marshalling yards, Münster, Germany	295A	2 Jan 45	Prum and Gerolstein, Germany
264	30 Oct 44	rail marshalling yards, Hamm, Germany	296	3 Jan 45	tactical target, St Vith, Belgium
265	1 Nov 44	Nordstern synthetic oil refinery, Gelsenkirchen, Germany	297	5 Jan 45	airfield at Nieder-Breisig, Germany
266	2 Nov 44	synthetic oil refinery, Sterkade, Germany	298A	6 Jan 45	rail marshalling yards, Cologne, Germany
267	4 Nov 44	synthetic oil refinery, Bottrop/Hamm, Germany	298B	7 Jan 45	rail Junction, Kall, Germany
268	5 Nov 44	rail marshalling yards, Frankfurt, Germany	299	8 Jan 45	transportation centres, Schweich/Koblenz, Germany
269	6 Nov 44	synthetic oil refinery, Bottrop/Hamm, Germany	300	11 Jan 45	airfields at Bonn and Brillon, Germany
270	9 Nov 44	tactical support of troops, Metz, Germany	301	13 Jan 45	rail bridge, Mannheim, Germany
271	10 Nov 44	airfields at Cologne, Germany	302	15 Jan 45	rail marshalling yards, Ingolstadt, Germany
272	11 Nov 44	Buer synthetic oil refinery, Gelsenkirchen, Germany	303	17 Jan 45	rail marshalling yards, Paderborn, Germany

304	20 Jan 45	rail bridge, Mannheim, Germany	336	14 Mar 45	rail bridge, Minden, Germany
305	21 Jan 45	engine repair shed, Aschaffenburg, Germany	337	15 Mar 45	German High Command Headquarters, Zossen, Germany
306	22 Jan 45	synthetic oil plant, Sterkade, Germany	338	17 Mar 45	rail marshalling yards and bridge, Erfurt, Germany
307	23 Jan 45	rail marshalling yards, Neuss, Germany	339	18 Mar 45	rail marshalling yards, Berlin, Germany
308	28 Jan 45	rail marshalling yards, Cologne, Germany	340	19 Mar 45	military objectives, Plauen, Germany
309	29 Jan 45	rail marshalling yards, Siegen, Germany	341	20 Mar 45	oil refinery, Hamburg, Germany
310	2 Feb 45	rail bridge, Mannheim, Germany	342	21 Mar 45	aerodromes at Hopstein and Hesepe, Germany
311	3 Feb 45	military objectives, Berlin, Germany	343	22 Mar 45	tactical target-military camp, Buer, Germany
312	6 Feb 45	Friedrichoda/Geisel/Ostheim city areas, Germany	344	23 Mar 45	rail facilities, Gladbeck, Germany
313	9 Feb 45	synthetic oil plant, Lutzkendorf, Germany	345	24 Mar 45	Furstenau aerodrome, Germany
314	14 Feb 45	military objectives, Dresden, Germany	346	24 Mar 45	Twente-Enschede aerodrome, Holland
315	15 Feb 45	military objectives, Dresden, Germany	347	28 Mar 45	Branden-Burgische motor works, Berlin/Spandau, Germany
316	16 Feb 45	synthetic oil plant, Langendreer, Germany	348	30 Mar 45	U-boat yards, Bremen, Germany
317	19 Feb 45	coking plant, Gelsenkirchen, Germany	349	31 Mar 45	rail marshalling yards, Halle, Germany
318	20 Feb 45	rail marshalling yards, Nürnberg, Germany	350	3 Apr 45	U-boat works, Kiel, Germany
319	21 Feb 45	rail marshalling yards, Nürnberg, Germany	351	4 Apr 45	factory area, Unterluss, Germany
320	22 Feb 45	rail marshalling yards, Ulzen, Germany	352	5 Apr 45	ordnance depot, Bayreuth, Germany
321	23 Feb 45	rail marshalling yards, Kitzingen, Germany	353	6 Apr 45	rail marshalling yard, Leipzig, Germany
322	24 Feb 45	Mineralwerke oil storage depot, Hamburg, Germany	354	7 Apr 45	rail marshalling yards, Hitzacker, Germany
323	25 Feb 45	tank factory, Friedrichshafen, Germany	355	8 Apr 45	Shafstadt aerodrome, Germany
324	26 Feb 45	rail marshalling yards, Berlin, Germany	356	9 Apr 45	munitions factory, Wollratshausen, Germany
325	27 Feb 45	rail marshalling yards, Leipzig, Germany	357	10 Apr 45	ordnance and equipment depot, Oranienburg (Berlin), Germany
326	28 Feb 45	rail marshalling yards, Hagen, Germany	358	11 Apr 45	underground oil storage tanks, Freiam, Germany
327	1 Mar 45	rail marshalling yards, Bruchsal, Germany	359	14 Apr 45	gun emplacements, Bordeaux/Royan, France
328	2 Mar 45	rail marshalling yards, Chemnitz, Germany	360	15 Apr 45	gun emplacements, Bordeaux/Royan, France
329	3 Mar 45	tank factory, Hannover, Germany	361	16 Apr 45	railroad bridge, Straubing, Germany
330	4 Mar 45	ordnance depot, Ulm, Germany	362	17 Apr 45	Friedrichstadt rail marshalling yards, Dresden, Germany
330A	6 Mar 45	air-sea rescue mission	363	20 Apr 45	rail marshalling yards, Truenbrietzen, Germany
331	7 Mar 45	synthetic oil refinery, Dortmund-Harpenerweg, Germany	364	25 Apr 45	Skoda armament works, Pilsen, Czechoslovakia
332	8 Mar 45	Benzol plant, Essen, Germany			
333	10 Mar 45	rail marshalling yards, Schwerte, Germany			
334	11 Mar 45	U-boat pens, Bremen, Germany			
335	12 Mar 45	rail centre, Betzdorf, Germany			

COLOUR PLATES

1

B-17F-25-BO 41-24558 *OOOLD SOLJER* of the 360th, flown by 1Lt Keith Bartlett, 31 March 1943

With nose art inspired by a Disney cartoon featuring 'Pluto' in the Army, *OOOLD SOLJER* was one of 35 original 303rd B-17Fs delivered to Kellogg Field, Michigan, between 11 September 1942 and 2 October 1942. Assigned to Capt Lewis E Lyle's crew, it was aptly named. Lyle became the most honoured and respected combat leader in the 303rd, serving throughout the war, and flying over 69 missions. Tragically, eight of Lyle's crew died on 31 March 1943, flying for the first time with a new pilot, when *OOOLD SOLJER* collided with the 358th BS's "*TWO BEAUTS*" (see Profile 25) during group assembly. It was the 18th mission for this squadron 'flagship'.

2

B-17F-25-BO 41-24561 *THE DUCHESS* of the 358th BS, flown by 1Lt Harold Stouse, Spring 1944

1Lt Jack W Mathis, bombardier on Lt Stouse's crew, received the Medal of Honor posthumously for his conduct during a raid against a U-boat yard at Vegesack on 27 March 1943. A 303rd original, *THE DUCHESS* completed 59 missions before returning to the USA on 7 July 1944 for a war bond tour. By then it had the second-highest group B-17F mission total, and was the longest-serving F-model Fortress in the entire Eighth Air Force.

3

B-17F-25-BO 41-24562 *SKY WOLF* of the 358th BS, flown by 1Lt Aubrey Emerson, 11 January 1944

A 303rd original, and initially assigned to Lt Carl Morales's crew, *SKY WOLF* proved extremely reliable, and duly became a lead ship. The waist-art, painted by PFC Bernard Kastenbaum, depicts a winged-wolf shooting a bomb-tipped arrow – see the artwork gallery for details.

4

B-17F-25-BO 41-24577 *HELL'S ANGELS* of the 358th BS, flown by Capt Merle Hungerford, 26 January 1943

A 303rd original, *HELL'S ANGELS* not only inspired the 303rd's name, but was also the first Eighth Air Force B-17 to complete 25 missions, 23 with Capt Irl L Baldwin's crew. This occurred on 13 May 1943, six days before *Memphis Belle* reached the 25-mission mark. *HELL'S ANGELS* finished 48 missions without injury to any crewman. Its last full operation was an attack on Bremen on 11 November 1943. With its fuselage autographed by hundreds of 303rd personnel, *HELL'S ANGELS* returned to the USA on 20 January 1944 for a reunion with Baldwin's crew and a war factory 'industrial morale' tour. *HELL'S ANGELS* was scrapped at Searcy Field, Stillwater, Oklahoma on 7 August 1945, but its reputation as one of the most famous Eighth Air Force B-17s remains very much intact.

5

B-17F-27-BO 41-24587 *BAD CHECK* of the 427th BS, flown by 1Lt George McClellan, 11 January 1944

Another 303rd original, *BAD CHECK* was assigned to Capt Billy B Southworth's crew. Some sources credit

BAD CHECK's name to prisoners at San Quentin Federal Penitentiary, who allegedly financed its production through war bond purchases, and who named it because 'a bad check always comes back'. Others credit the name to the crew's bombardier, 2Lt Milton Conner, for the same reason. *BAD CHECK* fell to fighters with Lt McClellan's crew on the 11 January 1944 mission to Oschersleben, its 45th.

■

B-17F-27-BO 41-24605 *KNOCK-OUT DROPPER* of the 359th BS, flown by 1Lt John Savage, 27 March 1944

Yet another group original first assigned to 1Lt Jack Roller's crew, *KNOCK-OUT DROPPER* was the first Eighth Air Force B-17 to complete both 50 (16 November 1943, Knaben, Norway) and 75 (27 March 1944, Chartres, France) missions. After its 75th mission, the bomber was autographed by group personnel (a tradition started by *HELL'S ANGELS*) and returned to the USA for a war bond tour. *KNOCK-OUT DROPPER* was scrapped at Kingman, Arizona, on 19 July 1945.

7

B-17F-27-BO 41-24619 *S-for-Sugar* of the 427th BS, flown by Lt Franklin Leve, 16 November 1943

A 303rd original, *S-for-Sugar* was first assigned to Capt Glenn Hagenbuch's crew. The bomber later came to be identified as the 427th BS 'flagship' due to the 'Bugs Bunny' squadron symbol painted on its nose, which other 427th aircraft also carried for a time. Assigned as a lead ship on many operations, *S-for-Sugar* also fell to fighters on the 11 January 1944 Oschersleben raid (its 52nd), with 1Lt T Lamar Simmons's crew.

8

B-17F-27-BO 41-24635 *THE 8 BALL Mk II* of the 359th BS, flown by Brig Gen Robert Travis and Lt Col William Calhoun, 11 January 1944

One of the first replacements joining the 303rd, this aircraft was the most famous of three group B-17s named *THE 8 BALL*. The original was written off in a crash-landing on 20 December 1942. *THE 8 BALL Mk II* introduced actor Clark Gable to combat on 4 May 1943. It won further renown as a lucky lead ship which always returned from the toughest missions. The bomber led the Eighth on the 11 January 1944 Oschersleben raid, and completed 37 missions between 3 January 1943 and 27 March 1944. It was scrapped in the USA on 2 August 1945. *THE 8 BALL Mk III* was an aluminium-finish B-17G which completed 57 missions between 19 May 1944 and a final crash-landing on 2 November 1944. All three aircraft carried identical nose art, limited to *THE 8 BALL*, and had the BN-O fuselage code.

9

B-17F-5-DL 42-2973 *IZA-AVAILABLE* of the 360th BS, flown by 1Lt Robert Cogswell, 17 August 1943

IZA-AVAILABLE was another early replacement aircraft with a very distinguished record. It completed 54 missions – the third-highest of any 303rd B-17F – between 30 December 1942 (St Nazaire, France) and 19 March 1944 (Wizernes, France), after which the bomber returned to the USA. It

safely carried Lt Cogswell's crew on the 17 August 1943 Schweinfurt mission. The bomber was scrapped in November 1944.

10

B-17F-10-DL 42-3002 *The Old Squaw* of the 359th BS, flown by Lt Robert Hullar, 6 September 1943

The Old Squaw joined the 303rd on 8 April 1943 and was on its 16th mission to Stuttgart on 6 September 1943 when Lt Hullar's crew was forced to ditch just short of England. The aircraft had run out of fuel due to excessive time over Stuttgart and battle-damage. Hullar's crew flew it as a last-minute substitute when their regular aircraft had engine trouble. They were lucky to be picked up promptly by an RAF rescue launch, and completed their 25-mission tour between 16 August 1943 and 20 January 1944 with no serious injuries.

11

B-17F-15-DL 42-3029 *WALLAROO* of the 359th BS, flown by Flt Off Thomas Quinn, 14 October 1943

This aircraft entered 303rd service on 9 April 1943 and was credited with 36 missions, including the second Schweinfurt raid, when it was flown by Flt Off Quinn's crew, and the 11 January 1944 Oschersleben mission, when manned by Lt Vern Moncur's crew. The veteran bomber was lost to flak on 14 January 1944 during an attack on *Crossbow* (V1 site) targets near Gueschart, France, with Capt Merle Hungerford's crew of 11, who escaped by parachute and survived the war as PoWs.

12

B-17F-25-DL 42-3131 "*FLAK-WOLF*", also known as *Winnie the Pooh*, of the 427th BS, flown by Lt Robert Hullar, 16 August 1943

This aircraft entered service on 4 June 1943, and introduced Lt Hullar's crew to combat on 16 August 1943. ■ was credited with 40 missions before being lost on the 11 January 1944 Oschersleben mission with Lt John Carothers' crew. The reason for the name ■ unknown. It also featured wheel hubs decorated with the early national insignia – see the artwork gallery for details.

13

B-17F-30-BO 42-5054 *The Belle of San Joaquin* of the 360th BS, flown by Lt Earl Thomas, 8 February 1944

The 'Belle was a 25 September 1943 transfer from the 306th BG, with whom it had served since ■ July 1943. Assigned to the 303rd until March 1944, the bomber was probably a 'hanger queen', as it flew only 14 missions (and was credited with eight) whilst with the 'Hell's Angels'. The Fortress returned to the USA on 7 May 1944 and was scrapped at Kingman, Arizona, on 11 February 1945.

14

B-17F-35-BO 42-5081 *Luscious Lady* of the 427th BS, flown by Lt Robert Hullar, 14 October 1943

Assigned on 15 February 1943, *Luscious Lady* was dispatched on 39 missions and credited with 33. It was well-regarded by Lt Hullar's crew, who flew the bomber on both the first and second Schweinfurt raids. On 22 February 1944 T/Sgt William Werner remained at the 'Lady's tail-guns despite multiple wounds from cannon shells and flak during ■ mission to Aschersleben. He was

awarded the DSC. The 'Lady left 303rd service on 6 April 1944 and transferred to the Fifteenth Air Force's 419th BS/ 301st BG in Lucera, Italy. It served there for an indeterminate time, before returning to the US and finding further employment as a replacement crew trainer at Tinker AAF Base, Oklahoma. The bomber was scrapped at Eglin Field, Florida, on 3 January 1946. The 38th RS emblem was carefully painted onto the 'Lady's wheel hubs, reflecting the pride of ancestry of the 427th BS's ground echelon in their predecessor unit – see the artwork gallery for details.

15

B-17F-45-BO 42-5264 *YANKEE DOODLE DANDY* of the 358th BS, flown by 1Lt John Henderson, 11 January 1944

YANKEE DOODLE DANDY arrived at Molesworth on 1 February 1943 and remained in service until 27 March 1944, seeing heavy action, heroism and much spilled blood during its career. Missions included the first and second Schweinfurt raids, the mission to Hamburg on 25 July 1943 when four crewmen were wounded and one almost died of anoxia, and a bitter encounter with fighters over Gilze-Rijen on 19 August 1943 which left the tail-gunner seriously hurt and five more wounded. On 11 January 1944 Lt John Henderson's crew put up an incredible fight as stragglers during the Oschersleben mission when two gunners were killed and two wounded in exchange for 11 enemy fighters damaged or destroyed. The aircraft returned to the USA on 3 April 1944, where it gave further service as a replacement crew trainer at Amarillo, Texas. The bomber was scrapped at Stillwater, Oklahoma, on 24 September 1945.

16

B-17F-45-BO 42-5341 *VICIOUS VIRGIN* of the 427th BS, flown by Lt David Shelhamer, 10 October 1943

VICIOUS VIRGIN arrived at Molesworth on 7 February 1943. It was credited with 39 missions between Wilhelmshaven, Germany, on 26 February 1943 and Wizernes, France, on 19 March 1944, including the first and second Schweinfurt raids. 1Lt Shelhamer's crew flew it on the 10 October 1943 Coesfeld mission. Considered extremely reliable, the bomber was designated a lead ship, flying many missions in that role. Renamed *Scarlet Harlot* after its last combat operation, the Fortress was painted with red, white and blue bands on the fuselage and wings and used as a weather-ship and target-tug. It returned to the USA on 6 January 1945 and was scrapped on 9 October at Stillwater, Oklahoma. Like *Luscious Lady*, *VICIOUS VIRGIN'S* wheel hubs were also decorated with the 38th RS emblem.

17

B-17F-50-BO 42-5360 *War Bride*, also known as *Old Faithful*, of the 358th BS, flown by 1Lt John Hendry Jr, 14 October 1943

Also named *Old Faithful* on its starboard nose, the *War Bride* was renowned for the extravagant pin-up on its port nose. Assigned on 8 January 1943, the bomber served until lost to fighters on the 11 January 1944 Oschersleben mission – its 35th – while being flown by 2Lt H A Schwaeba's crew. On the second Schweinfurt mission it got 1Lt Hendry's crew home, despite losing the No 3 engine and straggling behind the formation.

18

B-17F-50-BO 42-5382 *The "WITCHES' TIT"* of the 360th BS, flown by 1Lt David Mack, 25 June 1943

Although its nose art is infamous, this aircraft also carried a virtually unknown female figure on the tail - see the artwork gallery for details. Assigned on 25 February 1943, the Fortress lasted exactly four months in service before it was lost to flak over Hamburg on 25 June 1943 with 1Lt Mack's crew.

19

B-17F-50-BO 42-5393 *THUMPER AGAIN*, also known as *THE LITTLE WOMAN* and *Just for LAFFS*, of the 360th BS, 15 June 1943

Assigned on 25 February 1943, this aircraft was given the name *THUMPER AGAIN* in honour of *THUMPER*, an original 360th BS aircraft written-off in a belly-landing on 23 January 1943. The bomber acquired the added name *THE LITTLE WOMAN* when decorated with pin-up art on both sides of the vertical stabiliser, and was also referred to as *Just for LAFFS*, a slogan painted near the pilot's port window. *THUMPER AGAIN* was credited with 43 missions, beginning with Lorient on 6 March 1943 and ending with Stuttgart on 25 February 1944. Its tally included Stuttgart on 11 September 1943 and Schweinfurt on 17 August 1943, 14 October 1943 and 24 February 1944. The Fortress was transferred to the 100th BG on 4 March 1944, flown back to the USA on 18 June 1944 and scrapped on 4 October 1945 at Altus, Oklahoma.

20

B-17F-50-BO 42-5432 *'THE HUNTING CLUB'*, also known as *Just for Laughs*, of the 358th BS, flown by 1Lt Ray W Jess, 22 June 1943

Assigned on 25 February 1943, *THE HUNTING CLUB* was decorated with tail art after a Disney cartoon featuring 'Donald Duck' on a hunt. It completed 17 missions, beginning with Rotterdam on 4 March 1943. The Fortress subsequently fell to flak with the Jess crew aboard on the 22 June 1943 mission against the synthetic oil plant at Huls.

21

B-17F-50-BO 42-5434 *LADY LUCK*, also known as *Bob's Boudoir* and *SHAD RACK*, of the 360th BS, flown by Lt Lloyd Griffin, 16 April 1943

Assigned on 11 March 1943 and sent on 29 missions, the aircraft is shown before its tail art was removed, flying with Lt Griffin's crew on a 16 April 1943 mission against a power station at Lorient. *LADY LUCK* was anything but lucky during its last operation on 26 September 1943 when, returning from a recalled mission, a runaway No 4 propeller threatened to tear the wing off over England with a full load of bombs. 1Lt Robert Cogswell ordered his crew to bale out and rode the aircraft down to ensure it did not crash in a populated area. He jumped at such low altitude, and at such a high speed, that the opening of his parachute caused him serious back injuries which prevented him from returning to combat operations in World War 2 - Cogswell was later killed whilst flying B-29s in the Korea War. Five members of Cogswell's crew were the only 303rd BG personnel to survive a ditching (on 30 July 1943), a crash-landing (on 27 August) and a bale-out (on 26 September).

22

YB-40 42-5735 *Tampa Tornado* of the 359th BS, August 1943

No YB-40 ever flew a combat mission in 303rd livery, but in July and August 1943 three ex-327th BS/92nd BG YB-40s were transferred to the 303rd for short periods, and were in turn repainted in the bomb group's markings. They were *Tampa Tornado* of the 359th BS, *Dakota Demon* of the 360th BS and *Lufkin Ruffian* of the 427th BS. This profile is drawn from David Shelhamer's August 1943 photograph which is the only known illustration of a YB-40 in 303rd markings. The three horizontal bars painted on the nose take the form of 0.50-cal machine gun silhouettes, and they represent each of the missions flown by the *Tampa Tornado* while briefly assigned to the 92nd BG. This marking is highly appropriate, as the YB-40 carried no bombs, just extra guns and ammunition. *Tampa Tornado* had served with the 303rd for only five days (3 to 8 August 1943) when it was transferred to the 524th BS/379th BG. The Fortress was scrapped at Ontario, California, on 18 May 1945.

23

B-17F-25-VE 42-5854 *Alley Oop* of the 360th BS, flown by Lt Henry Glass, 23 March 1944

This Lockheed-Vega-built B-17 (note the cheek-gun window peculiar to Vega B-17Fs) was transferred from the 100th BG on 13 July 1943. It completed 31 missions, beginning with Heroya on 24 July 1943, and including the second Schweinfurt raid. The bomber's last mission was to Hamm/Ahlen on 23 March 1944, when flown by 1Lt Glass's crew. Returned to the USA on 6 June 1944, the bomber was scrapped at Kingman, Arizona, on 14 December 1945.

24

B-17F-60-BO 42-29571 *"Charley Horse"* of the 358th BS, flown by 2Lt William Hartigan, 20 October 1943

"Charley Horse" was received on 6 April 1943, flew its first mission to Antwerp, on 5 April 1943 and was credited with 32 mission. It fell to fighters on the mission to Düren on 20 October 1943 with 2Lt Hartigan's crew.

25

B-17F-60-BO 42-29573 *"Two BEAUTS"* of the 358th BS, flown by 2Lt James Dunn, 31 March 1943

"Two BEAUTS" did not last long enough in combat for many to appreciate its artwork. The bomber reported to the 358th BS on 6 March 1943 and flew its first mission to Amiens one week later. The B-17 was starting only its fourth operation, to Rotterdam, on 31 March with 2Lt Dunn's crew when it collided with *OOOLD SOLJER* (see Profile 1) in ten-tenths cloud. Only three aboard 42-29573 survived.

26

B-17F-65-BO 42-29664 *Jersey Bounce Jr* of the 358th BS, flown by 1Lt John Henderson, 20 December 1943

This aircraft was named after *Jersey Bounce*, an original 303rd aircraft which was transferred out on 27 July 1943. *Jersey Bounce Jr* was received on 21 March 1943, and began operations on 31 March against Rotterdam. The bomber ditched on its 34th dispatched mission on 20 December with 1Lt Henderson's crew. S/Sgt Forrest K

Vosler, the radioman, was awarded the second Medal of Honor received by a 303rd member for his conduct aboard *Jersey Bounce Jr* on this mission.

27

B-17F-75-BO 42-29931 *SATAN'S WORKSHOP*II, also known as *Devil's Workshop*, of the 359th BS, flown by Brig Gen Robert Travis and Maj Lewis Lyle, 11 September 1943

Like *Alley Oop* (see Profile 23), *SATAN'S WORKSHOP*II was transferred from prior service with the 100th BG on 13 July 1943. It completed many operations as a lead ship with Lewis Lyle in the pilot's seat. These included the first Schweinfurt mission and the raid on Stuttgart on 11 September 1943, with Brig Gen Travis as mission leader in the co-pilot's seat. On the 11 January 1944 Oschersleben mission it led the heavily-attacked 303rd low group formation under Capt John Casello and Maj Glynn Shumake, the 359th BS CO and formation leader. Luck ran out for *SATAN'S WORKSHOP*II during its 34th mission on 22 February 1944 to Aschersleben when flak knocked out the No 2 engine and it ditched in mid-Channel on the return. 1Lt George Underwood's entire crew drowned.

28

B-17F-80-BO 42-29995 *MR FIVE BY FIVE* of the 427th BS, flown by Maj Edgar Snyder Jr and Capt Alexander Strickland, 14 October 1943

Assigned on 16 May 1943, it led the 303rd on the second Schweinfurt raid under Maj Snyder, 427th BS CO, with Capt Alexander Strickland's crew. The bomber was lost on its 24th mission, to Bremen, on 26 November with Capt Adele Coté's crew, who perished when the aircraft ditched in the North Sea on the return leg.

29

B-17G-1-BO 42-31060 *POGUE MA HONE* of the 427th BS, flown by Lt Kenneth Brangwin, 28 May 1944

Among the earliest B-17Gs joining the 303rd on 16 October 1943, *POGUE MA HONE* – Gaelic for Kiss My Ass – came equipped with under-wing shackles for 2000-lb GB-1 Glide Bombs. These were used operationally only on 29 May 1944 against Cologne, when the aircraft was flown by Lt Brangwin's crew. *POGUE MA HONE* gave valuable service as a regular bomber, flying 71 missions between 26 November 1943, to Bremen, and 9 February 1945, to Lutzendorf. On the latter mission, whilst being flown by 1Lt Alfred Nerner, it collided with another 427th BS aircraft and crashed east of Jaraczewo, Poland, while attempting to reach the safety of Russian lines. Three crew were rescued by Soviet troops and returned to Molesworth on 5 March 1945.

30

B-17G-10-BO 42-31241 *Spirit of Wanette*, also known as *City of Wanette*, of the 427th BS, flown by Lt Edward Woddrup, 20 December 1943

Named after a tiny Oklahoma town, *Spirit of Wanette* joined the 427th BS on 16 November 1943 and was credited with 31 missions. Its most memorable was to Bremen on 20 December 1943. 'Woody' Woddrup was awarded the Silver Star for skilful evasion of multiple twin-engined fighter attacks with all but one gun frozen by the cold, the right wingtip blown apart by flak, one engine

knocked out and another crippled by a malfunctioning supercharger. *Spirit of Wanette* was lost over the Baltic on 29 April 1944 with 2Lt Howard Bohle's crew while attempting to reach Sweden after losing an engine and suffering major fuel loss from flak over Berlin.

31

B-17G-20-BO 42-31616 *The Spirit of "FLAK-WOLF"* of the 427th BS, flown by 1Lt Emmittes Harrison Jr, 22 February 1944

Assigned on 14 January 1944, three days after the loss of "FLAK-WOLF" (see Profile 12), this B-17 carried the same 'U' aircraft letter. The bomber crashed during take-off on its 21st operation, to Marienburg, on 1 April, killing pilot 1Lt John McGarry Jr and five other crewmen.

32

B-17G-35-BO 42-32027 *Betty Jane* of the 427th BS, flown by 1Lt Carl Dubose Jr, 15 August 1944

Assigned on 1 March 1944, *Betty Jane* won distinction for completing 86 missions between 2 March (Frankfurt-Main) and 13 September (Eisenach). It survived Wiesbaden on 15 August 1944, with 1Lt Dubose's crew, when JG 300 shot down nine group aircraft. On the bomber's last mission, it left the formation after the target with two engines feathered, losing a third later. 2Lt Carl Heleen Jr's crew baled out at low altitude and became PoWs. Heleen was the last to leave, and he was killed when his parachute failed to open.

33

B-17G-1-VE 42-39769 *MISSMANOOKI* of the 359th BS, flown by 2Lt Billy Goolsby, 16 November 1943

MISSMANOOKI was a hanger queen. Assigned on 18 October 1943, its first operation came nearly a month later to Knaben, Norway, on 16 November 1943 with 2Lt Billy Goolsby's crew. The bomber's second mission came nearly a month after that, when it went to Bremen on 13 December, again with the Goolsby crew. During a routine local flight six days later it suffered a left main landing gear collapse while landing and was salvaged.

34

B-17G-5-VE 42-39885 *Sweet ROSE O'GRADY* of the 427th BS, flown by 2Lt John Newton, 12 July 1944

The all-time high-mission 303rd B-17 with 134 operational sorties, *Sweet ROSE O'GRADY* was originally just *ROSE O'GRADY*. Assigned on 30 December 1943, its first mission was to Kiel on 4 January 1944. The bomber participated in the group's 364th, and last mission, an attack on the Skoda Armament Works at Pilsen on 25 April 1945. It wore the call letters 'Z', then 'R' from 24 August 1944. Munich on 12 July 1944, with 2Lt John Newton's crew aboard, was the B-17's 55th operation. The veteran was scrapped at Kingman, Arizona, on 8 December 1945.

35

B-17G-45-BO 42-97298 *The FLOOSE* of the 358th BS, flown by 2Lt Lawrence Stein, 12 July 1944

Assigned the 398th BG on 20 February 1944, then to the 96th BG on 22 April 1944, *The FLOOSE* found a permanent home at Molesworth on 6 May 1944. It completed 100+ 303rd missions between Berlin on 8 May and 24 December 1944, and was the first Eighth Air Force heavy bomber to

complete 100 missions. The bomber came to an untimely end while on loan to the 92nd BG when its pilot failed to lower the landing gear completely, causing it to collapse and *The FLOOSE* to be salvaged. The B-17 is illustrated as it appeared on its 55th operation.

36

B-17G-20-VE 42-97546 *IDLIZA* of the 360th BS, flown by 2Lt Nelson O'Beirne, 13 April 1944

IDLIZA was with the 92nd BG from 11 February until its transfer to the 457th BG on 24 February and assignment to Molesworth on 13 March 1944. The bomber logged 104 missions with the 303rd between the Augsburg raid on 16 March 1944 and the group's last on 25 April 1945. The nose art was taken from a photograph of Mary Lou Hanson, a wartime employee of the USAAF Modification Center, Lowry AAF Base, Denver, Colorado. Miss Hanson was asked by the base photographer to pose for some calendar pictures, but the artist responsible for the nose art is unknown. For his bravery on 13 April 1944, 2Lt Thomas F. Dello Buono, the O'Beirne crew's bombardier, was awarded the DSC for returning to his post despite grievous injuries to defend the aircraft against fighters, and drop a highly accurate bomb pattern on target. Col Thomas Buono (as he then was) retired in 1965 after a distinguished career in Strategic Air Command. He died in February 1999 at Glendale, Arizona. *IDLIZA* was eventually scrapped at Kingman, Arizona, on 12 January 1946.

37

B-17G-65-BO 43-37590 *Neva The Silver Lady* of the 358th BS, flown by 1Lt Harry Gobrecht, 8 March 1945
Neva The Silver Lady logged the second highest 303rd mission total at 127. Assigned on 11 June 1944, the bomber was named after the wife of its groundcrew chief, M/Sgt Albert Fox. Its first mission was to Nantes on 10 June 1944 and, the B-17 also participated in the Magdeburg mission on 11 September, when IV. *Sturm* JG 3 and JG 300 shot down 11 303rd B-17s. Its final mission was also the group's last, on 25 April 1945 to Pilsen. 1Lt Gobrecht flew 20 of his crew's 36 missions in the bomber, including the Essen raid on 8 March 1945. The aircraft was scrapped at Kingman, Arizona, on 27 January 1945.

38

B-17G-85-BO 43-38289 *Sweet LaRhonda* of the 359th BS, flown by 1Lt Lawrence Harding, 8 March 1945
Sweet LaRhonda was assigned on 31 August 1944 and

served to the end of the war, logging 75 missions between Ludwigshafen on 3 September 1944 and Hesepe/Hopsten on 21 March 1945. The aircraft was named after the wife of 1Lt Henry Embrey, pilot of its first regularly-assigned crew. With 1Lt Lawrence Harding's crew, the aircraft flew its 64th mission, to Essen, on 8 April 1945 and was scrapped at Kingman, Arizona, on 27 November.

39

B-17G-105-BO 43-39160 *G-for-George*, also known as "*Lil Bit*", of the 358th BS, flown by 2Lt Francis Taub, 20 March 1945

Assigned on 4 February 1945, this was the only 303rd B-17 with white sidewall tyres, as recommended to its pilot, 1Lt William McLeod, by its first enlisted aircrew and groundcrew. They were so proud of this that a painting of a main-landing-gear tyre decorated the port-side near the pilot's window! *G-for-George*'s first operation was to Ostheim on 6 February 1945 with McLeod's crew. It was dispatched on 26 missions and completed 18 before being lost to Me 262s over Hamburg on 20 March 1945 with 2Lt Francis Taub's crew. It is believed that the ball-turret gunner, Sgt James Hollowell, destroyed an Me 262 just prior to the bomber's demise.

Back Cover

B-17G-25-DL 42-38050 *THUNDER BIRD* of the 359th BS, flown by 2Lt Loren Bohle, 21 March 1945

Familiar to millions from Keith Ferris's mural, *Fortresses Under Fire*, at the NASM in Washington, DC, *THUNDER BIRD* merits such prominence. Assigned on 18 January 1944, its first mission was to Frankfurt-Main on 29 January with 2Lt Vern Moncur's crew – the only one to fly the bomber as its regular ship. The B-17's name was suggested by Moncur, who described it as 'an Indian symbol for luck, and we sure will need it'. His crew completed their 28-mission tour without anyone being injured, reportedly the first 303rd crew to do so. *THUNDER BIRD* then became a 'first mission ship', used to give new crews a good start. No regular crewmember was ever injured on a *THUNDER BIRD* mission. As it neared the end of its combat service, 112 missions, *THUNDER BIRD* was an amazing sight, with innumerable patches and spare parts from other aircraft. The bomber is depicted here on its 111th mission to the German airfields at Hesepe and Hopsten. *THUNDER BIRD* was scrapped on 21 December 1945 at Kingman, Arizona.

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The 303rd BG was in the vanguard of the daylight bombing campaign through to VE-Day. Along the way it enjoyed a number of 'firsts' – one of its B-17s was the first bomber to complete 25 missions (in June 1943); it was the first bomb group to complete 300 missions from the UK; and it eventually flew more missions than any other B-17 group in the 'Mighty Eighth'. Awarded a Distinguished Unit Citation in January 1944, the 303rd also had two of its aircrewmembers presented with the Medal of Honor, America's ultimate military decoration. Brian D O'Neill brings the group's colourful combat history to life with a mix of first-hand accounts, raw statistics and concise mission narrative.

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